



McCartney, Elspeth and Ellis, Sue (2010) Supporting students who struggle with language. In: Motivating Children's Literacy in Today's World. New Zealand Council for Educational Research, Wellington. ISBN 9781877398650 ,

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Status: Book Chapter

Reference:

McCartney, E and Ellis , S (2010) Supporting students who struggle with language in , J. Fletcher., .F. Parkhill , & G. Gillon, (Eds). *Motivating children's literacy in today's world*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

Supporting students who struggle with language

Elspeth McCartney and Sue Ellis

Motivating children who struggle with language

This chapter considers children who have speech, language and communication difficulties. These can arise from insufficient quality or quantity of language experience, or they may arise developmentally, despite appropriate language input from families and carers. They may or may not be associated with impairments such as hearing loss, learning disabilities, cerebral palsy or autistic spectrum disorders.

Whether children's difficulties are specific to language-learning or more general, it is important that they become motivated, engaged learners. Motivation is central, but not in itself enough to guarantee high engagement. Engaged readers are intrinsically (rather than extrinsically) motivated to read, and have the required resources and strategies to do so. Meta-analyses show that strategy teaching, curricular coherence, choice, social collaboration and purpose all impact upon reading engagement (Guthrie and Wigfield 2000). Motivation and engagement impact upon attainment through mechanisms such as practice effects and perseverance. Continued engagement is therefore particularly important for children with speech, language and communication difficulties. Where language is part of the problem, children are at significant risk of literacy difficulties persisting into adult life (Law et al. 2009).

Children with difficulties form a worryingly large group in mainstream education. Meeting their needs will be the responsibility of most teachers at some time in their careers. Lee (2008) suggests:

'on average, every primary school classroom in the UK will have two or three children who have some form of speech language and communication needs'
(Lee 2008: 7)

Children whose language impairment is fairly specific often leave school with lowered school attainments (Conti Ramsden et al. 2009). Many report lowered self-esteem until the end of compulsory schooling, related to their academic difficulties. Lowered self-esteem appears to be an outcome of literacy difficulties, rather than a cause, and

post-school contexts when literacy difficulties become less intrusive coincide with higher self-esteem (Lindsay et al. 2009).

Unlike typically-developing children, or those for whom English is a new language, children who struggle with language often find it difficult to learn new words. They must hear them many more times than other children if they are to absorb their meanings and use them. When they meet a new word, whether written or spoken, they may have difficulty in breaking it down into its morphological or phonemic segments. They may also have relatively few related words stored in their semantic system, which makes understanding definitions and explanations difficult (cf. Nash and Donaldson, 2005). They may also find it difficult to remember long sentences with complex clause structures, which are found in many reading materials, or to remember information across paragraphs (reviewed by Gajria et al. 2007).

Their difficulties therefore may include decoding written text, and understanding text meanings. Writing can be even more challenging, requiring adherence to spelling, sentence construction and genre conventions. Children with speech, language and communication difficulties are coping with ongoing and taxing learning impairments that require teachers to have knowledge of specific supporting strategies, in addition to those needed to motivate and engage all children.

General motivating factors

Guthrie and Humenick (2004) outline the aspects of the curriculum that create engagement:

- Teaching pedagogies that actively promote *curricular coherence* and *strategy-teaching*, so that children are taught strategies that will ‘travel’ from one lesson and context to another, and are encouraged to see how these can be applied to their learning across the curriculum. This may require quiet, but important, shifts in current pedagogies rather than brand new approaches. For example, when teaching children strategies teachers often ask them to identify, at the end of a particular lesson, what they have learned. However, if teachers were to ask children when they might next use (and practise) these strategies and knowledge, it could increase curricular coherence.
- *Purposeful tasks* which foster intrinsic, rather than extrinsic, motivation and create mastery-orientated rather than performance-orientated conditions also matter. In mastery conditions pupils become interested in ideas, learning processes, the level of challenge and the strategies used: in performance-orientated tasks they focus on attainment-outcomes and on gaining a competitive advantage over others.
- Opportunities for children to *exercise choice* and to engage *with interesting, relevant and stimulating tasks and texts* also increase engagement and motivation to read.
- Finally, opportunities and expectations of *social collaboration* in learning tasks and contexts create engagement. Collaborative tasks encourage intrinsic motivation, and promote self-efficacy and persistence. Children are more

likely to 'have a go' at complex tasks, and to persist when they encounter difficulties, if there is a collaborative, social element to their learning.

A growing body of research indicates counter productive socio-environmental processes that de-motivate pupils and allow negative learning behaviours to thrive. Stanovich (1986) coined the term 'Matthew Effects' to describe how small differences in learning to read during a child's first year of school could have lasting and compounding effects. Children who made a slower start in the most 'visible' aspect of reading, decoding words, could quickly become caught-up in a downward learning spiral. They found reading difficult and experienced fewer incidental opportunities to practise. This meant they fell behind others who were grabbing every possible opportunity to read. As children began to realise they were less competent, they began to actively avoid reading, which ensured they got even less practice - further widening the gap between the highest and lowest attainers.

Moss (2007) draws on ethnographic evidence to explain why some boys who find themselves in classroom contexts that place a high emphasis on reading proficiency choose to read non-fiction books. They may not actually prefer non-fiction, but are aware that fiction texts signal their competence as a reader by the amount of text on the page, the length of the book and the size of print. Non-fiction texts may not do this so overtly, making them particularly appealing to status-conscious boys who are not high-achievers in reading. Moreover, the pictorial nature of many non-fiction texts and the reader's pre-existing knowledge of the topic often allows them to be discussed without necessarily being read. Moss's research is a caution against adopting simplistic explanations about literacy behaviours and translating them unquestioningly into policy and practice. Her work would suggest that flooding schools with non-fiction texts on the grounds that 'boys like to read them' may not produce the positive results on reading attainment that policy makers and schools desire.

Being aware of such fundamental issues, how they are embedded in the social fabric of the classroom and how they impact on motivation are essential knowledge for teachers.

Motivation and engagement of children with speech, language and communication difficulties

In addition to motivating factors that apply to all children, others are necessary to engage children with speech, language and communication difficulties. These are discussed under four headings: maintaining a 'communication-friendly' classroom; penalty-free signals of comprehension difficulties and obtaining clarification; direct language teaching, and sources of help and advice for teachers.

Maintaining a 'communication-friendly' classroom

'Communication friendly' classroom practices are not new to teachers: they are basic teaching skills. However they are particularly important in increasing the motivation and engagement of children who struggle with language.

Learning and Teaching Scotland (2000) detail nineteen principles that were

compressed by McCartney et al. (2009) into six themes covering classroom organization, management and teacher interactions:

- *enhancing the physical environment*, by creating good visual and listening conditions;
- *planning communication partners and opportunities for talk*, by ensuring that children are in supportive and responsive peer groups, with only one child talking at a time, and with encouragement to express thoughts and feelings;
- *planning topics*, of interest to children and with clear advance warnings of a change of topic;
- *offering visual support and demonstration*, by showing what is expected using pictorial support, experiential learning, games and role-playing;
- *verbal* aspects of teacher interaction, including using short and simple sentence constructions, simplifying and repeating instructions, and giving instructions one at a time;
- *non-verbal* aspects of teacher interaction, providing natural but clear talk that is not too loud, too fast or slow, or exaggerated; making good eye contact; talking only when not facing the board, and limiting teacher movement around the classroom.

McCartney et al. (2009) note that these features of good communication can be problematic. Teachers often have little control over background noise or lighting levels, limited opportunities for group work and topic choice, or a topic's interest to individuals. Verbal and non-verbal aspects of teacher communication are highly routinised, and difficult to change. Nevertheless, in that paper teachers did report adaptations to their interaction to support children with language difficulties. Teachers simplified their instructions; checked for child attention and understanding; and became aware of their rate and clarity of speech.

Comprehension difficulties and clarification

Crucially, in a 'communication friendly' classroom it is acceptable to ask for and receive clarification because one does not understand. There are often penalties in asking teachers to re-phrase or repeat. It risks signaling that one has not understood when others have, and the danger of being thought inattentive, or worse. There is also a social challenge in asking for clarification. It could suggest that the teacher did not communicate clearly, and so seem 'cheeky' or challenging. For such reasons, child clarification requests to teachers are less frequent than those of teachers to children, although it is children who have measured comprehension problems.

In Scotland, some of these ingrained difficulties are being challenged by the Scottish Government's *Assessment is for Learning* programme (LTS, 2010). Teachers use techniques to get 'instant feedback' on their teaching. A show of thumbs indicates how knowledgeable, confident or competent pupils feel about a particular activity or teaching point: thumbs straight up indicate high confidence; thumbs parallel to the floor indicate the learner is less clear about what is required, or what has been taught. Thumbs pointing down indicate that a learner is thoroughly confused and would like the task or teaching point to be completely re-explained.

Other ways of encouraging clarification requests and encouraging active listening have been developed (Dollaghan, and Kaston, 1986; Johnson, 2000). These stress that despite listening carefully and paying attention in class, from time to time people will

not understand each other. This is no-one's fault - sometimes acoustic conditions are problematic, or a speaker uses words unfamiliar to the listener and/or sentences that are too complicated, or a listener just misses a bit. The important thing is to recognise and remedy the misunderstanding. If the listener identifies the problem, they should feel safe in asking the speaker to revise without being thought rude. If the speaker feels the listener may have misunderstood, they check if a clarification would be helpful and offer a repetition or re-phrasing. No one ridicules anyone, no eyes are rolled or sighs are sighed. It is safe to admit to the problem.

Again, such ideas are not new to teachers, and can benefit all children, but require specific teaching to children with language difficulties. A classroom culture that allows clarification and improved understanding is a positive, motivating environment. Only when unrecognized, do problems remain un-repaired.

Direct language teaching

Children with speech, language and communication needs may also benefit from direct teaching of linguistic elements. Teaching new vocabulary at the point it is needed in curriculum work is helpful. Teaching links to other words (e.g. synonyms, antonyms and categories) can help fix a word in the semantic system and reinforce its meaning, as can definitions and illustrations. Linking the word with its written form at the same time, and discussing its phonological and morphological patterns, can help to 'glue' a new word in memory. This is often done with curricular content words. However, Boyle et al. (2007) developed an efficacious intervention for children with expressive language impairments where vocabulary learning was heavily orientated to common English words, including content and relational terms (e.g. *either/or* and *unless*); sequential words (e.g. *first/next/last*); and words with specific meanings in mathematical contexts. Such words are important in understanding oral and written instructions and dealing with curriculum areas such as science. Teaching them at point of need, and regular reminders, can demystify the curriculum and benefit motivation.

Other areas may similarly require direct teaching, including the grammatical structures encountered in written texts, which differ considerably from spoken language; tracking meaning throughout a text; narrative and story grammars, and the 'rules' for good oral or written stories. The important issue is to create a culture that allows learning and success, and so enhances motivation.

Sources of help and advice for teachers

There are resources available to school staff to support them in developing motivating classes. We have produced documents for teachers, developed and validated in research studies (McCartney et al. in press). Our *Language Support Model for Teachers* was developed with teachers and speech and language pathologists to support children with specific language impairment in mainstream primary schools. This is adaptable to other contexts and offers practical guidance on how to create a communication-friendly classroom; encourage comprehension monitoring and teach as necessary vocabulary, grammar and oral narrative. It is free to download from <http://www.strath.ac.uk/eps/courses/slt/lms.html>.

There is also advice for teachers working with children with particular difficulties. In the UK the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) produces 'Deaf Friendly' materials, available for schools (free international registration from <http://www.ndcs.org.uk/>). The British Association of Stammering has information for secondary schools supporting children who stammer at <http://www.stammeringineducation.net> The Scottish Government's Autism Toolbox at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/07/06111319/0> gives suggestions on organizing classrooms and learning for children on the autistic spectrum.

These are examples: many organizations concerned with the welfare of particular groups of children offer similar resources and advice to motivate and engage children who struggle with language.

Final words

No learning, and especially no language learning, can be divorced from the social and emotional context in which it takes place. In a celebrated editorial Richard Allington (2005) responded to a US National Reading Panel report (NICHHD, 2000) which identified five pillars of scientific reading instruction (phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). Allington accepted these as critical, but proposed five additional pillars detailing the purposes and contexts of learning to read (interesting texts and choice; matching a text to a child; linking writing and reading; balancing whole-class, group and individual teaching, and expert tutoring). He argued these were equally crucial and equally deserving of attention.

In summary, children with language and communication needs require direct teaching about specific aspects of language, literacy and communication. However, they also benefit hugely from communication-friendly classrooms, where it is acceptable to say 'I don't understand'; and from teachers who are mindful of their own communication patterns, of their pupils' language and communication needs, and of the need to provide purposes and contexts for learning that motivate and support all children in using language and literacy to communicate.

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