

Language Impairment: Understanding Expressive Language

Est. Time: 15–30 Minutes

Objective

Understand how a language disorder can affect a student’s expressive language and his subsequent ability to convey knowledge and to participate in class discussions and activities.

Overview

Language is complicated. Many rules must be applied correctly if effective communication is to occur. A student with a language impairment has difficulty mastering (or the inability to master) the various systems of rules in language, which then interferes with communication. Language impairments involve difficulties with at least one of the following:

- **Expressive language**—the ability to convey one’s thoughts, feelings, and ideas through speaking or writing
- **Receptive language**—the ability to receive information, usually through reading or listening
- **Pragmatics**—the appropriate use of language in social contexts

This activity will focus on expressive language. For many people, expressive language is more difficult to master than receptive language. For example, toddlers can understand a request (receptive language) such as “Go get the ball!” long before they are able to verbalize those same words (expressive language). Many adults recognize and know the meanings of certain words when they encounter them in print, but can’t recall them for use in their spoken vocabulary. For students with language disorders, however, a difficulty with expressive language impairs the ability to communicate effectively. In some cases, they may leave out information necessary to understanding the message. In other cases, they may not be able to recall a key word. In still others, they may not be able to adequately convey their depth of knowledge on a given subject.

Activity

1. Conduct an Internet search of expressive language, making sure to consult reputable sources. Make a list of challenges a student with an expressive language disorder may experience, and possible supports educators can provide to address those challenges.
2. Read the following examples and answer the subsequent questions.

Example A

Fourth-grader Elliott stays in an extended-day program after school. When his mother picked him up one afternoon, he said, “I’m glad you finally came. I was the last one here.” Elliot’s mother looked around the room and counted ten other children. Eventually, after much questioning, she ascertained that Elliot meant, “I was the last of the 4th-graders here.”

The next day, Elliot’s class was excited. The principal had promised to bring them a treat for having the best attendance in the building. Elliot’s teacher sent him to the office with an instruction to “Ask the principal when is she coming to our classroom.” Elliot went to the office but conveyed a slightly altered message, “My teacher wants to know if you can come to our classroom.”

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Hearing this message, the principal thought there was a problem and hurried to the classroom, only to discover that a miscommunication had occurred.

Example B

Twelve-year-old Briana was excited about the swimming pool her grandparents were putting in their backyard. As she began to explain to her friends what it would look like, she said, “It’s shaped like a…” but then paused, unable to recall the word that described its shape. After a few seconds, she continued, “It’s shaped like a circle, but the sides are longer.”

“You mean an oval?” teased one of her friends.

Briana laughed, embarrassed, and replied “Yep, that’s exactly what I mean.”

Later that day, Briana found out that she’d failed a science test made up of 20 fill-in-the-blank questions. Briana was frustrated because she knew the content well. Her teacher decided to give her an alternate form of the test, one in which Briana could use a word bank to answer the same 20 questions. Because she was able to recognize and select the correct answer rather than recall the word herself, Briana got an A on the test.

Example C

Jalen loves anything having to do with knights, armor, and weapons, so he was enthralled during his social studies unit on medieval times. He did a lot of extra, outside reading and enjoyed listening to the teacher’s lectures and class discussions. The unit’s final exam contained 40 multiple-choice and short-answer questions—and one essay question. Jalen breezed through the 40 questions, but struggled with the essay. Although he knew the answer and what he wanted to write, he struggled to get his thoughts down on paper. At the end of the period, the essay portion of Jalen’s paper contained two incomplete sentences written around a large rip in the paper from Jalen repeatedly erasing words that failed to convey the thoughts in his head.

Questions

1. Example A included two examples of consistent expressive language mistakes.
 - a. What were his expressive language mistakes?
 - b. Have you ever known someone (a student or an adult) with similar expressive language challenges?
 - c. Now that you are aware of Elliott’s expressive language issues, is there anything you could recommend to his mother or to his teacher to prevent similar communication breakdowns in the future?
2. Example B included two examples of a consistent expressive language issue.
 - a. What was her expressive language issue?
 - b. How was she able to work around her inability to recall the word oval?
 - c. What ideas or suggestions can you suggest that Briana’s teacher implement to support her during class discussions? During test-taking?
3. Review Example C.
 - a. What type of expressive language challenge does Jalen face?
 - b. Can you think of viable alternatives to assess his knowledge?