



Language Impairment: Understanding Expressive Language

Est. Time: 15-30 Minutes

Objective

To understand how a language disorder can affect a student's expressive language and their subsequent ability to convey their knowledge and 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 disorder has difficulty mastering these rules, which can lead to communication breakdowns. Students with language disorders may have difficulty with *receptive* and *expressive* language, as well as with language in *social* contexts. This activity focuses on expressive language.

Expressive language refers to the ability to conveying one's thoughts, feelings, and ideas through speaking or writing. For many people, expressive language is more difficult to master than receptive language (understanding what is spoken or written). 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. Consider the following examples.

Example A

Fourth-grader Elliott stays in his school's Extended Day program after school. When his mother picked him up one afternoon, he told her, "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 fourth-graders here."

The next day, Elliot's class was excited because the school's principal promised to visit them with an undisclosed treat for having the best attendance in the building. Elliot's teacher sent him to the office with this message, "Ask the principal when she is coming to our classroom." Elliot went to the office but conveyed the slightly altered message, "My teacher wants to know if you can come to our classroom."



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Overview [Cont.]

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

Example B

Twelve-year-old Briana was excited about the swimming pool that 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...” and 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 twenty 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 twenty 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 forty multiple-choice and short-answer questions—and one essay question. Jalen breezed through the forty questions, but struggled with the essay. Although he knew the answer and knew 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.



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Activity

1. Elliott's scenario included two examples of consistent expressive-language mistakes. What were they? Have you ever known someone (a student or an adult) with similar expressive-language challenges? 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. Briana's scenario included two examples of a consistent expressive-language issue. What is it? How was she able to work around her inability to recall the word *oval*? What ideas or suggestions can you suggest that Briana's teacher implement to support her during class discussions? During test-taking?
3. What type of expressive-language challenge does Jalen face? Jalen needs an assessment option that allows him to convey the wealth of knowledge he has acquired. Can you think of viable alternatives?