



Language Impairment: Understanding Receptive Language

Est. Time: 15-30 Minutes

Objective

To understand how a language disorder can affect a student's receptive language and their subsequent ability to understand class discussions and course content.

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 receptive language.

Receptive language refers our ability to receive information, usually through reading or listening. Students with language disorders may struggle to understand what is spoken to them or to comprehend what they read. Language-based factors such as complicated sentence structure (e.g., simple versus complex) and unfamiliar vocabulary can increase the frustration that these students experience in the classroom. Consider the following examples.

Maddie reads the following passage from *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* (1958/1986), an assigned book for her eighth-grade language arts class.

Sailors began **vigorously** to roll out the great **casks** of molasses and *pile* them along the wharf. Two of the men lowered over the side the seven small leather trunks that held all of Kit's belongings and *piled* them, one beside the other on the wet **planking**. Kit **clambered** down the ladder and stood for the second time on the alien shore that was to be her home.

Her heart sank. This was Wethersfield! Just a narrow sandy stretch of shoreline, a few piles sunk in the river with rough planking for a platform. Out of the mist **juted** a row of **cavernous** wooden structures that must be warehouses, and beyond that the dense, dripping green of fields and woods. No town, not a house, only a few men and boys and two yapping dogs who had come to meet the boat. With something like panic Kit watched Goodwife Cruff descend the ladder and stride ahead of her husband along the wharf. Prudence, dragging at her mother's hand, gazed back **imploringly** as they passed. (*p. 26, boldface, italics, and underline added.*)



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Overview [Cont.]

This passage is confusing to Maddie for several reasons. First, she does not know what the words in **bold** mean, significantly decreasing her reading comprehension. Second, she mistakes the word *piles* in the second paragraph for the word *piled* in the first, and imagines something being piled in the river, but wonders, “Piles of what?”

Third, she associates the term *alien* with science fiction and beings from outer space, resulting in a misinterpretation of that sentence. Finally, although the passage contains relatively uncomplicated sentences, some of the phrasing confuses her. For example, she mistakenly thinks the phrase “Two of the men lowered over the side” means that two men were lowered over the side.

Example B

Carter’s language disorder makes it difficult for him to understand what information is being requested of him. Although he has the knowledge and skills to do well in school, his language disorder often causes him to misinterpret questions, thus giving the wrong answer. For example, in math class Carter reads the following word problem:

The temperature at 7:00 am was 72 degrees Fahrenheit. By noon, the temperature had risen 28 degrees. What was the temperature at noon?

Carter’s answer to the problem is 28 degrees.

On a social studies test, Carter must look at a population density map and identify three cities with populations over 100,000. Instead of listing three cities, Carter draws the map symbol representing populations over 100,000.

Example C

Myron’s teacher asks him to help her put some photographs of leaves on a bulletin board. The pictures are part of a learning center in which the students will have to look at the photos and identify key characteristics. Myron’s teacher tells him, “I wouldn’t put the photos up so high that students can’t view them easily.” The teacher’s choice of words confuses Myron; he isn’t sure whether he is or is not supposed to put the photos up high, and whether the students should or should not be able to view them easily.



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Activity

Because students with other disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities, autism) often have coexisting language disorders, teachers must be aware of how their learning may be affected and plan classroom assignments and activities with this in mind.

1. Find a text passage from a textbook, reading book, or Web site that you would use in a lesson. Identify words and phrases that could be confusing to students like Maddie. What can you do as a teacher to help students with language disorders comprehend the material and avoid confusion?
2. Why do you think Carter misunderstood the math question? The social studies question? Do you know of a strategy—or can you develop one—that would help Carter interpret the questions correctly?
3. Why do you think Myron was confused by his teacher's instructions? Can you come up with 2–3 instructions that would be similarly confusing? Restate those 2-3 statements, as well as that of Myron's teacher, to be more easily understood.

Resource

Spear, E. G. (1958). *The witch of blackbird pond*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company.