Developmental Language Disorder

Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) is the term used when a person has difficulty with talking and/or understanding language, and for which there is no known cause. DLD starts in childhood and affects all languages spoken.

Perhaps surprisingly for a developmental difference which relates to language, until recently there was no agreed terminology to accurately describe DLD. This confusion has resulted in DLD being unrecognised and misunderstood. International consensus was agreed in 2016, but still most people do not know about DLD. Every year RADLD (Raising Awareness of Developmental Language Disorder) hold an annual worldwide day in October. Each year there is a different theme to promote and raise awareness of DLD to a wide range of stakeholders, this year the day fell on Friday 18 October with the theme to 'Speak Up for DLD'.

The theme has allowed us the opportunity to write this article and raise awareness with the members of CIEA who are the professional body for language modifiers.

Developmental Language Disorder is common

DLD has been called the 'most common neurodisability that most people have never heard of.' With an incidence of 7.6%, this equates to two children in a class of 30.

Think about how much talk children need to understand to access learning in the classroom. The discussion of a shared book and the learning of new mathematic or scientific concepts all require language. It is hardly surprising to hear then that DLD has serious impacts on students' literacy, wider academic achievement and mental health.

Identifying DLD in the classroom

DLD has been referred to as a 'hidden disability' as it is impossible to tell by looking at someone if they have DLD. This is compounded by its variability. Contrary to belief, some students with DLD may even talk a lot. The most obvious signs of DLD will be students who cannot express themselves as well as their peers, using simpler vocabulary and shorter sentences.

Of those with this hidden disability, the most hidden are the students who have ~~poor~~ reduced/weaker understanding. Their expressive language may give some clues, but the severity and impact of their needs may not be obvious, which can delay access to appropriate supports. You may need to undertake some detective work to identify them as they rarely say, 'excuse me, but I don't understand.'

If a student presents with any of the following it is worth taking a closer look, as they may have underlying difficulties with understanding language.

- **Differences with attention and listening:** many with DLD struggle with listening, but when they are paying attention, do they understand what is said to them?
- **Off topic:** in class discussion they may pick up on the general gist and respond to that, rather than specifics.
- **Reading difficulties:** some students with DLD may struggle with phonics, but even once they can decode dothey understand what they read?
- **Associated social, emotional and behaviour regulation needs:** difficulties understanding language impact on emotional wellbeing and behaviour regulation in many different ways and research studies show 60-90% of all students with behaviour difficulties have a language disorder.

Supporting DLD in the classroom

A diagnosis of DLD can only be made by a specialist, such as a Speech and Language Therapist, conducting a thorough assessment. There is no cure, and short-term interventions will have limited effect, so the focus needs to be about long-term support, strategies, self-management and awareness. Because DLD presents in many different ways a personalised programme is essential, but these classroom strategies are a starting point.

Relationship: as with all vulnerable learners students with DLD need to feel they are understood and supported. They need trusted people to go to when they need to. They need people who know about DLD and how to support students with the condition.

Reduce the language load: differentiating whole class talk is a challenging skill to master, but a few modifications will make it more accessible for all learners. Use short, simple sentences. Use words you know they understand. Do not talk too long at any one time. Pause to allow processing time. Repeat key points. Summarise what you have said, especially if it has been longer or more complex.

Check understanding: not all students who struggle with understanding are aware of their needs or how much they are missing, so when asked 'do you understand?' they may answer 'yes', even when they do not. A better alternative is 'tell me what you need to do', or 'explain the process to a peer.' A strong relationship will make it easier for students to admit when they do not understand.

Non-verbal supports: when students struggle to extract meaning from language then alternative methods of conveying meaning need to be found. Use objects or hands-on learning where possible. A well-chosen image or photograph can act as a focus. Pictograms or symbols can be used to visually represent more abstract concepts. Free symbols are available from arasaac.org

Exam Access Arrangements: be aware of DLD and that some young people with a diagnosis will meet criteria for a language modifier. This accommodation will allow young people to be appropriately supported without either advantaging or disadvantaging them in examinations. This will ensure that the language is clear for the specific needs of the user without conferring advantage related to subject and technical knowledge.

Find out more about DLD:

RADLD - Raising Awareness of Developmental Language Disorder - RADLD

NAPLIC | Developmental Language Disorder

Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) educational support - Speech and Language UK: Changing young lives

Clinical information on developmental language disorder (DLD) | RCSLT

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