Spoken language and deaf learners

Katherine Richardson and *Lesley White* *look at teaching methods that support the development of deaf children's language skills*

Spoken language and deafness

Deaf children often present with a language delay. This results primarily from their hearing loss but can also be the result of other factors. All degrees of hearing loss will impact on a child's ability to develop language. This may initially result in a delay as the child is unable to hear speech and process language. Listening (hearing) and speech development are closely related and, without the ability to perceive sound, a child does not have the necessary tools to produce it.

Listening skills

Children develop their understanding of spoken language through listening, and in the case of deaf children, through lip reading too. Unfortunately, not all speech sounds are visible on the lips and this will then be reflected in the deaf child's spoken language. Furthermore, deaf children (even when aided) are often unable to access the higher frequency sounds such as "s". This may lead to grammatical immaturities in their speech, such as lack of plurals. While some deaf children, with the appropriate type of amplification (be it hearing aids or cochlear implants) are able to close the developmental gap in their spoken language skills, there are often areas of their language that still need further support. Deaf children who are able to close the gap often do so because of the support they receive from audiologists,

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speech therapists, teaching assistants and teachers of the deaf.

Specific ideas for developing language skills at primary school may include starting curriculum based vocabulary clubs, and developing deaf children's phonological awareness and narrative skills. Approaches such as colourful semantics and language colour coding systems (that help children identify word classes) to aid them in structuring sentences correctly are useful. Structured approaches to reading and developing inference skills also need to be included in lessons.

Identifying additional language difficulties in deaf children

More children now receive cochlear implants at a much younger age and can therefore often catch up and develop age appropriate language skills before they start school. As a result, some deaf children are now able to have better access to the curriculum. Unfortunately, because some of these children present with intelligible speech and good listening skills, underlying additional difficulties may go undetected until a much later stage. On the other hand,

it is now easier to indentify additional language difficulties, such as specific language impairment and dyslexia, in deaf children with cochlear implants, as they have had essentially the same opportunity to hear spoken language as their hearing peers.

Vocabulary and expressive language

One of the challenges faced by professionals working with deaf children is that language does not suddenly stop developing once they get into secondary school. In fact, young people continue to develop their understanding and use of increasingly complex and abstract language throughout adolescence. Vocabulary and figurative language

development become particularly important. Furthermore, not only do the language demands in the classroom increase in secondary school but the role of language in establishing peer group acceptance and personal identity is equally important and demanding.

Deaf children often have significantly delayed vocabulary knowledge compared to their hearing peers. One reason for this is that deaf children are unable to learn new words by just listening to people around them talk about their experiences and the world. Deaf children have to explicitly be taught vocabulary and there is no incidental learning. This task can be extremely tedious, especially when taking into consideration all the curriculum subjects and increasing language demands of deaf children; even those with good receptive and expressive language skills often find figurative language, such as understanding idioms, metaphors, similes and humour, difficult. Language skills, such as inference, are often delayed in deaf children. This is such an important skill, especially at GCSE level, where more abstract thinking and language skills are needed to succeed.

It is also important to mention language related to literacy development. Good vocabulary skills and a good command of language are essential in becoming a successful reader. Deaf children are therefore at risk of having a reading delay.

Useful strategies

Useful practical strategies in the classroom include reducing background noise. This could simply be the closing of a window, but more often the difficulty is caused by other members of the class.

Visual materials are essential in highlighting key concepts, new vocabulary and setting the context. Deaf children are constantly trying to fill in the gaps in spoken language and contextual signposts can be helpful in keeping them

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on the right conceptual path. Simply putting key terms up on the board, having concrete examples or models to show, or projecting supporting images will help. It is also crucially important to remember that many deaf children get useful additional information from a speaker's facial expression and lip patterns. Speaking while facing the board is to be avoided; a deaf child might not even realise the teacher is speaking in this situation.

Every lesson is a language lesson, even chatting to a deaf pupil while the class is getting ready. More important, however, is some understanding of where a child is linguistically and planning accordingly. This means, for example, avoiding texts that are beyond the reading age of the child, or being sensitive when marking work so that the child is not corrected on grammatical constructs that do not yet form part of their toolbox. Liaising with a teacher of the deaf should be at the very top of the priority list here.

Useful software for supporting language development

Mind mapping software can be used to create visual story boards which explain the themes of the lesson and provide a "scaffold" for students to use to develop their ideas. Such software can help to structure ideas and create a text outline. Good use can be made of picture clues and this can provide an alternative format for putting down ideas.

Some writing software gives students an increased level of confidence by providing predictions of the next word

they might want to write. This is of particular interest for students who have good oral ability and can often articulate the word they would like to use but are unable to spell it.

Voice-to-text software and audio and graphic books are becoming increasingly sophisticated and offer great advantages for the deaf student. Voice-to-text is most useful for students with good speech but very poor writing or spelling, who may still require support from a speech and language therapist. This is also a useful tool for those looking to go on to higher education as it enables them to work more independently.

Being aware of the difficulties deaf children face in terms of their language development is crucial in determining the type of interventions that will support them and ensuring that they have equal opportunities to achieve their GCSE and higher education potential. It is essential to remember that every child is unique. Language programmes need to be individually devised to meet the unique needs of each hearing impaired child. **SEN**

Further information
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