



COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES

Many children in schools can have difficulty understanding what is being said to them.

There are some strategies that can be used to reduce the load being placed on these students and help them cope with the demands of being in the classroom.

This resource pack is designed to offer general advice and strategies and is not intended to replace specific advice provided by a speech and language therapist.

If you have a student who is known to the Speech and Language Therapy Team, please contact them and they will be able to provide you with specific targets for that student as appropriate.



Areas covered in this pack:

- 🚩 Key Words.
- 🚩 Rate of Speech.
- 🚩 Directive Language.
- 🚩 Sarcasm, idioms and other non-literal language styles.
- 🚩 Pre-teaching vocabulary.
- 🚩 Visual support strategies.



Key words and information carrying words

These are the words that carry the meaning in a sentence or instruction, for example:

In this sentence:

'Before you go to your next lesson, I want you all to put your workbooks in a pile on my desk at the front of the room'

There are 27 words, yet only seven of them would be needed to give the same message to the class.

'put workbooks in pile on my desk'

We would not expect you to speak to your students this way all the time, but it is important that you are aware of how many words we use that do not carry meaning. Please contact your Speech and Language Therapy Team for more information on key words (information carrying words) if you feel your team would benefit from this.

Rate of speaking

Whilst there is often a lot of information to cover in lessons, it is important to consider how quickly you are speaking to your class.

Children with language and learning needs often require additional time to process the information they have heard. If you add more information very quickly, they may be unable to process it all and may then miss the added information. This can make them feel quite lost in lessons.

Try to pace your words and pause between additional chunks of information to help those students process what they are hearing.



Directive language

In English we tend to use language in a very polite way, giving instructions that are phrased as a question or choice;

for example, *'shall we go back to class now?'*

when what we mean is *'we're going back to class now.'*

For children with a language or learning difficulty, this can cause confusion as they are likely to interpret what has been said to them literally and so believe they are being given a choice rather than an instruction.

They may say *'no'* which, for them, is expressing their choice but the adult working with them may interpret it as being noncompliant or refusing to follow instructions and situations may then escalate.

By using directive language *'back to class now'* or *'go and get your maths book'* or *'coat on, it's playtime'* children have a much clearer understanding of what is required of them and tend to be calmer and more willing to follow that instruction.

This may not come naturally to us at first and will require the adult working with any student to think carefully about how they word things until it becomes more natural.









Sarcasm, idioms and other non-literal language styles

Many forms of humour are language-based. From the age of around eight, children start to learn to recognise language-based humour and move away from visual humour. For some children with language or learning difficulties, this may happen at a later age or may not happen at all.

It is important to try not to use sarcasm in the classroom as many students may not understand it, and may be upset by what they perceive as an insult.

There are several other forms of high-level language such as:

-  **Similes** – figures of speech that directly compare two things, usually using 'like' or 'as'.
For example, *“She felt as cold as ice”, “I slept like a log”*.
-  **Metaphors** - phrases that are used to make a comparison between two things that are not alike but have something in common.
For example, *“The snow is a white blanket”,
“The world is a stage”*.
-  **Idioms** – words or phrases that do not mean exactly what they say; they have a hidden meaning that is not often easy to work out from the words!
For example, *“A penny for your thoughts”,
“Let the cat out of the bag”*.
-  **Puns** - jokes exploiting the different possible meanings of a word, or the fact that there are words which sound alike but have different meanings.
For example, *“I was struggling to figure out how lightning works, then it struck me!”*, *“Reading while sunbathing makes you well red/read”*.
-  **Hyperbole** – figures of speech that use exaggeration to express strong feelings.
For example, *“I’m so hungry I could eat a horse!”*,
“They had been walking so long that John thought he might drink the entire lake when they found it”.

Students may need to be specifically taught the meaning of this type of language in order to learn to understand it. By all means use it in the classroom but be aware that some of your students may be unclear about the meaning.

If your student is known to the Speech and Language Therapy Team, they may be able to provide you with some activity ideas to support specific areas of need if appropriate.



Pre-teaching topic specific vocabulary


Students with learning and language difficulties are likely to need additional time and support to learn some of the complex vocabulary used in certain topics, particularly in secondary school.


Provide them with the glossary for each topic every half term and give them support and time to help them learn it. This way, when they hear the words being used in a lesson, they are able to understand it and continue participating rather than becoming lost and confused by words they do not understand.


Visual support strategies


This heading covers a very wide range of support strategies that can be used with students in school.


It can include:


 **Visual timetable** – provides a student with a timetable format that they can refer to regularly during the day. In secondary schools, timetables can be very complex and so a simplified version can be very helpful.


 **Task plans** – provides individual instructions for the learning objective that the student can refer to frequently during the lesson, reducing the need to seek adult support.


 **Aide-memoire** – useful for daily routines, such as organising themselves in the morning before school to make sure they have the right homework and textbooks for the day.


 **Mind maps** – a very useful way to help a student understand more complex topics such as the environment, health, history etc. For maximum benefit the student should make the mind map as this helps them remember everything better.


 **Word maps** – a great way to break down new words showing meaning, syllables, opposites, and categories and thus making it easier to remember and recall new vocabulary when they need it.

 **Social stories** – helpful to show a student what the behavioural expectations are in school and at home.

 **Comic strip conversations** – a great way to help students recognise when a social interaction went awry or help them plan for a conversation they may find difficult or stressful.

 **Spidergrammes** - great for comparing words in the same category.

 **Story grids** – very useful to help students structure a planned story.

 **Providing homework requirements in writing** rather than the student copying from the board – this takes the stress out of students having to rush to write things down, especially when other students are leaving to go to the next class and they may be worried about being late.

If your student is known to the Speech and Language Therapy Team they may be able to provide some specific strategies to support your student in school.