The 'language-friendly' primary classroom: Improving curriculum accessibility for students with language difficulties.

To summarise this background information, students with oral and written language difficulty often do not have the skills needed for the proficient understanding and learning of the academic curriculum. They may find new vocabulary and terminology overly complex, and the rate of delivery and amount of information presented at any one time too demanding. They may be challenged with processing and retaining information, also with demonstrating their knowledge through oral and written expression. Students with language difficulty may not even attempt a task if they think they cannot successfully undertake and complete it.

Making the curriculum more accessible to students with additional language-based learning needs aims to:

- Reduce the likelihood of failure by increasing opportunities for the students' academic achievement.
- Increase the students' classroom engagement in all oral and written language-based activities.
- Address the impact of disengagement and failure on students' behavior and mental health.

Teachers are often wary of adjusting the way they present curriculum content. They may be concerned that they are not fulfilling curricular directives or that they are being unfair to other students with no additional learning needs. However, in this program, increased accessibility to the curriculum is brought about through teachers applying instructional language modification techniques to their regular teaching practices, and not by making changes to the curriculum content. Additionally, curriculum accessibility involves having realistic expectations of what each student can achieve, and the amount of support needed for the task, thereby giving the targeted students the right tools to become more able learners.

Most importantly, teachers' use of instructional language modification strategies has been found to improve curriculum access for the benefit of entire classes, not just targeted students (Starling et al., 2012).

The modification of teachers' oral and written instructional language

Primary teachers spend more time with students each day than any other professional, and they are therefore key team members when addressing the effective management of students with language difficulty. Teachers' oral and written language is a fundamental part of teaching and learning. As previously described, students with language difficulty are challenged in processing, retaining, analysing and expressing their knowledge of language-based curriculum content.

Teachers can therefore have a significant impact on the learning abilities of students with language difficulties in their classes. One way to achieve this is by teachers making modifications to their oral and written instructional language, in ways presented in this program.

The LINK-UP Program coaches teachers in three main types of instructional language modification techniques, summarised as follows:
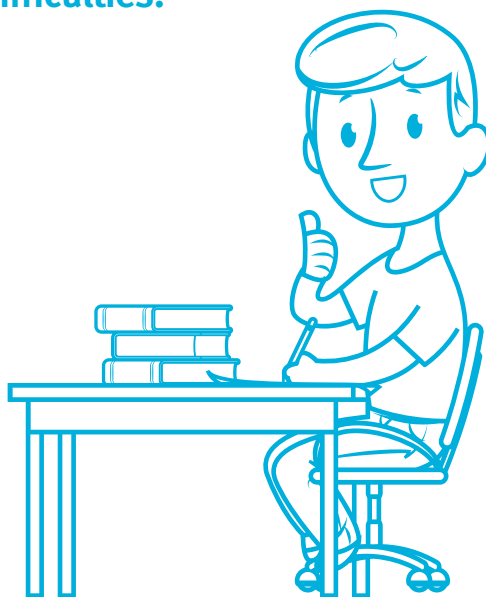
c) SLP presentation to whole-of-school teaching staff

It is recommended that a whole-school presentation is made early in the program, for example a 20-minute presentation as part of a general staff meeting. Suggested presentation content is outlined here:

LINK-UP Program: SLP's presentation to whole-of-school teaching staff.

- The nature and impact of DLD/LD in students

- Identification in the classroom

- Challenges for these students in middle and upper primary school academic/social environments

- Introduction to the LINK-UP Program: general outline and implementation information specific to the schools

- How all teachers can support primary school students with DLD/LD.

Summary of Planning Phase

a) Initial team meeting
b) Identification of essential topic vocabulary
c) Presentation to all school staff.

3.2 Topic introduction phase

Ideally, the program focuses on the teaching of a specific curricular topic from its introduction, instructional and assessment phases. Where this is not practical, the program can be adjusted to accommodate targeting a topic that is already underway.

Hint: Create a 'highly visible' teacher's folder in which all documents can be kept e.g. vocabulary test papers, examples of pre-post modified resources, SLP handouts, and week-by-week action plans. This can be brought to each meeting and regularly updated.

During this phase the program will focus on the teachers' use of language to introduce students to the new topics and concepts, as well as on the students' immediate engagement in the learning process. There are a series of tasks that form an essential part of the early stages of the program. These include:

i) An overview of the teachers' plans for topic instruction, including written resources

ii) A discussion of the essential topic vocabulary chosen by each teacher

iii) Introduction and explanation of the teachers' oral and written language checklists.

a) Topic-related instructional resources

Prior to the introduction of a new topic, the SLP and the teacher will look at resources together that will be used for topic instruction. These may be texts, new vocabulary, worksheets, information sheets, and project instructions. A visual planner could be created that shows the various components of the topic instruction as planned e.g. a time line including in-class and homework tasks.

Teachers will be introduced to the range of language modification techniques in a general manner. Some initial ideas will be discussed as they relate to each teacher's

The following system can then assist with making decisions about how to prioritise the tiered vocabulary that can be targeted in each new topic.

MUST...SHOULD...COULD

'Must know' words

Essential to the learning of a topic/concept. These words need to be systematically taught to enable students to recognise them on sight and/or hearing (usually Tier 2 words).

Topic 1: Climate and Weather

Examples: forecast, atmosphere, pressure, temperature, humidity, rainfall, drought, cyclone, meteorology, ozone.

Topic 2: Shapes

Examples: angles, sides, degrees, hexagon, pentagon, octagon, rhombus, parallelogram, regular, irregular,

> **"Vocabulary is one of the 5 pillars of learning to read."**
>
> **(Wheldall, 2011)**

'Should know' words

Words that are highly significant for understanding the topic (often Tier 2 words, but can be Tier 3 words)

Topic 1 examples: synoptic chart, isotherm, isobar, evaporation, precipitation, condensation, altitude, depression, trough, catchment.

Topic 2 examples: heptagon, nonagon, decagon, scalene triangle, trapezoid, pyramid, sphere.

'Could know' words

These words are *not essential* for a basic understanding of topic/concept, however they are useful and interesting. Teachers might label these words as 'extension vocabulary'. Word frequency is low, and restricted to specific curriculum content (usually Tier 3 words).

Topic 1 examples: barometer, troposphere, stratosphere, mesosphere, thermosphere.

Topic 2 examples: Polyhedron, tetrahedron, prism, kite, ellipsoid.

Selecting essential vocabulary

- Is the word essential for students' in-depth understanding of the topic?
- Will the word be used repeatedly in my teaching?
- Will students have multiple opportunities to use the word in their oral discussions and written work?
- If the word is complex (e.g. multisyllabic, unusual spelling, not often encountered in everyday language) do I have a strategy for supporting students' word learning?

Supporting students' understanding of written instructions

Written resources containing instructions for students to undertake and complete their own work often contain multi-part instructions and complex terminology. They may pose major challenges to students with LDs, who struggle to 'unpack' the information, work out what they are expected to produce, and ultimately undertake independent work. This may lead to negative situations such as the misinterpretation of the instructions, incomplete work or in some cases, complete avoidance.

ISSUE	MODIFICATION TECHNIQUES	EXAMPLES
Purpose and method of the assignment is unclear. (Student: '*I don't know what to do*')	• Ensure that the instructions and purpose of the project are explained in direct, accessible language. • **Include the key information,** such as the issue to be written about, **early in the text.** Students with LDs may miss this information if it is too 'buried' in the text. • Talk through the instruction sheet with the class, and ensure that all students understand all parts of the instructions. Be prepared to clarify important sections for students with LDs, remembering that these students are often not good at asking for help. • Include the subject's topic title as a heading. • Highlight/bold/underline the issue to be addressed in relation to the heading, so that students know **exactly what it is they are being asked to write about.** • Use the following headings, and include relevant information under each heading: **Topic, Issue, Instructions.** Use visual icons for reference. • Include meanings for potentially difficult-to-understand instructional vocabulary.	**See Appendix page 127, Understanding questions and instructions.** **Example:** '*Printed books as we know them will disappear in the 21st century. Write a couple of points both for and against this statement*' **Topic:** Books **Issue:** Will printed books disappear by the end of this century? Instructions: Write two points for AND two points against this statement. NB. A graphic timeline of the 21st century could be a useful vocabulary learning moment, where we are on the timeline and how many more years to go before the end of the century. Students with LD have great difficulty grasping the idea of time without visual aids.

Teachers' Oral Language Checklist

TARGET	COMMENTS
Balance between oral and other presentation types	
Content of oral communication	
Questioning style	
Organisation and sequencing of information	
Rate of speaking	
Volume of voice	
Voice intonation	
General intelligibility	

This form is provided as a full page, printable version in

2. **Increasing students' access to teachers' oral language: ideas for all teachers.**

POSSIBLE ISSUES	MODIFICATION TECHNIQUES
Balance of presentation modes: too much 'teacher talk', too few of other presentation types. 	• Increased use of other presentation types: demonstrations, visual aids such as videos, charts and posters, opportunities for hands-on learning. • At the conclusion of an oral presentation, such as a verbal discussion of an issue, or verbally brainstorming ideas, write the main points on the board in clear summary form. For example, a teacher might talk about the main points to be included in the students' written work, and then writes these points on the board. • Involve students in the summarising process e.g. by creating a mind map or a table of discussion points. • Create visual planners, calendars and other visual aids placed strategically in the classroom for the planning and organising of short- and long-term activities (e.g. excursions, assemblies, project due dates, and public holidays). Don't think this is just for Kindergarten classrooms!

Writing step-by-step

STEP 1

What do you have to write about?

Read the question, find the words that tell you this (the 'issue' words) and write your **POINTS.**

STEP 2

What's your point?

Write your **STATEMENT** sentence explaining what you mean by the point, linking your point to the question.

STEP 3

What makes you think that?

EXPAND your point with some ideas, explanations and/or descriptions, depending on what is relevant to the question.

STEP 4

How do you know all that?

This is where you write about the **EVIDENCE** for your knowledge and ideas, e.g. statistics, information from websites, quotes from books etc.

STEP 5

What does this all have to do with the question?

This is where you write your conclusion, and **LINK** back to the question.