Classroom Adjustments: Developmental Language Disorder

| **SPEAKER** | **CONTENT** |
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| Bella: | I find it very hard to communicate with teachers because sometimes I don't give a clear message. Sometimes I think I've given all the information but I miss important things so what I say and write doesn't always make sense to other people. My brain works at a different pace to both of these things. I can get tired easily because I'm trying to work out all of the language which is written down and what teachers say. Sometimes my brain might be going a little bit slower and I can't keep up with what is happening in class. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | That's Bella, she's 16-years-old doing year 11 in TAFE and hopes to become a graphic designer. Bella has a Developmental Language Disorder so she dictated that message to her personal scribe before reading it to me. Hi, I'm Serpil Senelmis and this podcast is part of an NCCD Portal Series. In this episode, we'll discuss some adjustments that could be made in the classroom to enable students with Developmental Language Disorders to participate on the same basis as their peers. You'll hear more from Bella and meet her personal scribe, it's her mom, Kylie. I'll also introduce you to two experts in the field of Developmental Language Disorders and a teacher specializing in this area. They've got several practical adjustments that can reduce the challenges posed by language in the classroom. |
| Pamela Snow: | Hello, my name's Professor Pamela Snow. I am a psychologist and speech pathologist and I am the head of the La Trobe Rural Health School. Well, I guess we need to start with language first and we first need to understand that language is a symbolic system, it's a way of representing thoughts, and ideas, and concepts, and language can exist via a number of different media. It can exist through the verbal domain, the spoken domain, but of course it also exists through reading and writing and that's why children who have language difficulties so often also have difficulties in the reading and writing domain. |
| Pamela Snow: | Children who have language disorders have various different profiles of difficulty that see them having problems with understanding the language used by others; so other people's language input might go too fast for them, they may have difficulty processing the complexity of sentence structure when people use long or embedded sentences, they may have limited vocabulary. They may, in more extreme cases, have difficulty using what we call grammatical markers, and then they have difficulties in the expressive domain so problems putting their thoughts and ideas into words in real time. |
| Pamela Snow: | In the case of everyday conversation, that happens very quickly. Topics change very quickly, often more than one conversation is happening at once. It's very taxing and demanding on auditory processing skills but these children have problems both with taking in information through the auditory verbal channel and putting information out. Children who have difficulties with language in the verbal domain will almost invariably display difficulties in the written domain because that's just another platform for using language. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | Given that language makes up the core of learning, I guess, that's how we learn through language, what are some of the big challenges that students are likely to face in the school environment specifically? |
| Pamela Snow: | Well, you're absolutely right. It's been said that learning floats on a sea of talk or words to that effect. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | I love that. |
| Pamela Snow: | It is wonderful, but classrooms are highly verbal environments so everything is transacted verbally; from when children come into the classroom in the morning and have to follow the very first instruction about sitting down and getting out a certain book or certain equipment, right through to the end of the day. This is very taxing for children with compromised language skills because they're working harder than everyone else in the classroom just at taking in the information, let alone trying to work out what the next step is and what they're going to do with that information. |
| Pamela Snow: | Where children who don't have language disorders are moving onto the next bit and the next bit, the child with a language disorder is struggling to process the basic requirements of what's being asked of them. Of course, we know that language disorders often go unrecognized, undiagnosed, and these are children that can look like they're inattentive, uncooperative, off in their own little world, not well motivated, but in fact, they're just working very hard to take in the basic information. |
| Haley Tancredi: | My name's Haley Tancredi, I'm a Sessional Academic in the Faculty of Education at Queensland University of Technology. I'm also a researcher within the Student Engagement Learning and Behavior Research Group and a certified practicing speech pathologist. The term developmental can be a little bit confusing, it doesn't just refer to early childhood years. Developmental Language Disorder impacts people across the lifespan. Often, teachers will be really aware that a student in their class is having difficulty with their learning, they can see that they're having difficulty with learning to read, they can see that they're having difficulty understanding directions that are given to the class. Even though they know that difficulty's there, it can be really hard to pinpoint what's going on. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | Tina Ellis is a teacher who has worked with students with Developmental Language Disorders in the classroom. She's managed to identify some key areas where students face the greatest challenges. |
| Tina Ellis: | Some of the challenges would be trying to wade through wording text. I probably would be more inclined to break that down for the student and relate the text to either my experience so that it makes sense or I would relate it to the child's experience. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | Tina's used her understanding of Developmental Language Disorder to make adjustments to her teaching style that benefit all students . |
| Tina Ellis: | To start with, I believe that planning needs to be quite well thought out with regards to the structure of a unit, not only for students with Developmental Language Disorder but for all the needs of the students in the class. That needs to be really the first step, thorough planning on how you're going to go about certain activities, how to convey certain concepts so that the students are able to actually grasp what you're trying to teach. |
| Tina Ellis: | To give you a bit of an idea, I have a student with Developmental Language Disorder in my year eight English class and she finds visual prompts really beneficial. For example, the presence of graphs or diagrams or concept maps on the board help her unpack information or tangible objects, things that she can actually use, manipulatives and so on. The chunking of information would be high on the list of trying to make sure that a lot of the work is presented in small components. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | We began this episode with Bella describing the challenges she experiences with a Developmental Language Disorder. Her mom, Kylie, explains how it has affected her at school. |
| Kylie: | The impact has been quite significant over time. When she was very young, she used sign language to communicate and when she began in primary school she was using a PECS Communication System to communicate with others. She developed oral language but it's been a bit of a struggle for her to express what it is that she knows and what it is that she needs, over time. If she was wanting a drink, she would give me a picture of a drink but then she started developing oral language so when she went to school then she did have some oral language but it was significantly different from what her peers had. |
| Kylie: | It was of like she was looking through a folder on your computer looking for a certain word and she just kept going into different folders. Sometimes she would need to find a different word because she couldn't find exactly what it was that she was wanting to communicate. |
| Pamela Snow: | We need to consider ways that we can reduce the cognitive load for these students. One way to reduce the cognitive load is to consider the physical environment, the amount of background noise, the seating configuration. These are students who might actually be disadvantaged by sitting in groups where they're facing other students and being distracted by the chatter of other student, whereas students who don't have language disorders might be quite able to screen that out and still stay on task. Looking at ways of being fairly efficient, not being too wordy, unnecessarily wordy in delivering initial instructions, it might be useful to, in some cases, to supplement verbal instructions with some kind of visual cues, visual prompts that assist those students. They'll often need to hear or see things more than once in order to have repeated opportunities for mastery and consolidation. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | Can I just drill down on the visual prompts? When you say visual prompts, to me that sounds like showing maybe a video. Is that what we mean by visual cues? |
| Pamela Snow: | Yeah. I'm probably thinking more simply than that. Maybe having some key words written down on a piece of paper, having some words highlighted or bolded so if we're giving students instruction on a task that they're going to be doing in the classroom, not just giving these students instructions verbally but also giving them a written backup and maybe highlighting some of the key words that we want them to focus on. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | Teacher Tina Ellis uses visual prompts as a way to support all of the students in the classroom. |
| Tina Ellis: | I find that by listing on the board, to start with, what the activities are of the day or of the lesson so all students can see visually what we're going to actually work through. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | These are exactly the types of adjustment that student Bella finds effective and, as a high school student, she's comfortable speaking up to let her teachers know what she needs. |
| Bella: | At the beginning of the year, I do an introduction to my teachers and share with them strategies and adjustments which can help me and why. For, example, like using different coloured pens to write on the board, using planners to help me organize things for summits, and using simple language and not making sentences too long. Other adjustments are using a computer to type my answers. For assignments, they will do up a plan in a scaffold for me to help me work out where to start and what to do first. Sometimes they give me links through to websites and resources which might help me. When doing assignments, sometimes they get someone to write down my ideas just like my personal secretary. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | Are you getting the feeling that Bella's quite good at identifying what support she needs? According to her mum, Kylie, it's something she's worked very hard at. |
| Kylie: | Bella probably, since about grade eight, has really worked hard at getting a relationship with her teachers from the onset of the year and letting them know what it is that needs to work for her. She doesn't want to leave things to chance and for teachers just to try and work things out she wants them to know before school starts. She wants them to be able to have an understanding that, "Okay yep, I know that I don't learn the same way as everybody else. If you do these simple things like using different coloured pens to be able to write on the board, to using short sentences, to making sure that you have a planner out for what we need to do for assignments, that will help me.  |
| Serpil Senelmis: | For adjustments like these, Dr. Pamela's Snow points out that they simply require a rethink about the educational purpose of an activity. |
| Pamela Snow: | Typically, the way that we think about checking comprehension is by asking someone to repeat back to us their understanding of what we've asked them to do. A problem for students with language disorders is that they may understand what has been asked of them but they may have such fragile verbal skills that they're not able to actually put that into words. |
| Tina Ellis: | Inviting the student to actually retell what they have learned is a big one. Some of them are quite articulate and can tell you exactly what they have just learned and other students will have difficulties in doing that so it's being able to identify how they learn best and how they can demonstrate their knowledge to you the best way that they are able to. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | This is also an area where technology can be a great help as well. |
| Pamela Snow: | Simple adjustments that are very easily available like having access to audio books or using the tools on your internet browser that's going to convert text and things into an audio file is going to really support that student in being able to understand. Technology is one that can really be very beneficial if the right tool is chosen for the right task but I think it's always being really mindful of why the tool is being chosen. |
| Tina Ellis: | If you have perhaps a text with, say, five or six comprehension questions underneath, what I would do was have that text either available in an audio form so they can hear it or in the written form so they can see it, but also I would give them one or two questions that they're working on whereas the other group may be working on all six. Within the classroom, there are different students at different levels but their needs are being met. I'm not pitching to the middle and expecting everyone to understand what's going on. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | Would you say there's any technology that your teachers use that really helps with your learning? |
| Bella: | Text speech. |
| Serpil Senelmis.: | How does that help you? |
| Bella: | It helps me to listen and then comprehend and then I can highlight and I can write down notes. |
| Pamela Snow: | I think the thing about electronic tools and technology is that they are, at best, supports, they're not an end in themselves. They can get in the way and be a distraction but they could potentially increase the complexity of what we're asking a student to do rather than decrease it. I think we should be able to, in most cases, particularly for younger students, make adjustments without having to rely on electronic tools. There might be situations, for example, with electronic organizers and so forth, particularly for older students. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | So reduce visual noise in the classroom, use images to support words, and be flexible around whether things are written, read or spoken. In addition to these key adjustments, speech pathologist, Haley Tancredi recommends a focus on simplifying language. |
| Haley Tancredi: | A really big one, I guess, is around teachers' consciousness of their spoken language. The complexity of the words that they're using when they're explaining concepts, thinking about the way that they structure their sentences, building in additional thinking time and processing time for students. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | Do you mean using shorter sentences and more simple words? |
| Haley Tancredi: | Absolutely. Reduced sentence length. A big part of this is when teachers have content to teach a lot of time goes into preparing the content, but I think there's also a need to stop and think about how that content is going to be shared with the students. Even considering what kinds of examples are going to be given and students will have better access to a smaller number of examples that are explained in a concise way rather than lots of examples which can tend to cause confusion, adjusting the pace of their language and making sure that that is not too fast but also not too slow. |
| Haley Tancredi: | I think the really big one for students with Developmental Language Disorder is repetition. Often when they hear information, they often experience working memory difficulties and so one exposure to that piece of information may not be enough and they might only hear pieces of what's been said. If they can have that repeated a second time, that that's going to help, which also leads to adjustments around providing multiple modes of representing information. |
| Haley Tancredi: | They really do need to understand the foundational level of what you're trying to say directly instead of going about it in a more inflated way, if you like. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | As part of the simplification of language, think about the usability and necessity of new words. |
| Tina Ellis: | I think the really key thing is also about teaching vocabulary that's going to have a breadth of application for the student. It is a very natural thing to want to teach vocabulary to a student that is specific to the topic that we're working on. If we're doing year eight science and we're talking about states of matter, sticking to that vocabulary or that specific genre and that particular task, we want to talk about solids, liquids and gasses and the transfers that happen. |
| Tina Ellis: | Another area of vocabulary that's been shown to be very powerful for students with Developmental Language Disorder is to teach them words that are going to go across all different subject areas. These might be highly descriptive words, so different adjectives that they can use. Also, words that demonstrate the process because some of the processes in science will also be processes that they might experience when they're in food tech or when they're writing in somebody’s paper. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | When it comes to tasks and assessments, teacher Tina Ellis, suggests making more of your time available for students with Developmental Language Disorder. |
| Tina Ellis: | Providing a student with a scaffolded version of a task sheet, it may be a written task, I would go through it with them. If they had difficulty with writing their sentences, I would scribe for them while they spoke. Offering them a reader or a scribe are two adjustments which I've found to be quite effective. With regards to the actual piece of assessment, I would try to make sure that the task is visually simple so that it is not a complex task which is too wordy as well and just reducing the quantity of elements on one page will help them as well. |
| Tina Ellis: | I would also let the student know early on that they are eligible for extra time so if they require extra time that that is quite okay, and assess against the achievement standard so that we're actually assessing what we're supposed to be assessing and not testing for the sake of testing without having a purpose. Even if you looked at the discipline of students that have difficulty with times tables or addition, subtraction, we would give them the tables so that they could just focus on the equations that had to do, eliminating that processing of the tables because that's something they find difficult, sometimes because of memory. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | Students with Developmental Language Disorder really need to work quite closely with their teachers. |
| Pamela Snow: | I guess it's particularly important they have a strong relationship with their teachers because they can be very good at going under the radar and being something of a chameleon. By the time they get to school that they, and particularly to high school, they've often got well developed strategies to be able to stay under the radar and they've got an experience of not always understanding what people are saying to them. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | Of course, teachers will benefit from a good working relationship with parents and carers as well. |
| Haley Tancredi: | The parents will also have a bit of an idea of what kinds of adjustments regarding environment would be beneficial for their child because they know them well. Ultimately, you really want that communication between all stakeholders so the student, the parents, the teachers, and the support staff so that everyone is on the same page. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | How often should teachers be reviewing the adjustments that they've put in place and making changes to their teaching approach? |
| Haley Tancredi: | I would say, really you need to be regularly monitoring your adjustments and keeping a note of your reflective practice so what are you doing for the student? What worked, what didn't? Be honest. If it's not going to work, then write it down so that next time, that didn't work last time, how can I adapt to the situation now? Very much, adjustments need to be noted on the unit plan of what you intend to do but be flexible with how you go forward. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | In summing up, teacher Tina Ellis reminds us what it's all about. |
| Tina Ellis: | I believe that student voice is paramount. We need to be listening to the student and what their needs are, if they can articulate them. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | Bella's mom, Kylie, agrees and recommends preparing early to ensure a seamless experience for students. |
| Kylie: | I would say, form a partnership with the student, form a partnership with the parent. Have some basic strategies that you implement for all students and then tailor it to students' individual needs. Make it as easy as you can for the teacher and for the student as well but plan from the onset. Don't try to retrofit things or change things for the student. Look at what are the barriers before you start. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | What's your advice, Bella, for teachers who have a student like yourself? |
| Bella: | I would say learn all about them and what they think works and what they find hard. Learn different strategies to make language and formatting easier for people to understand. Try out different fonts and strategies and ask the student what works best for them. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | This podcast is part of a series that highlights adjustments that could be made in the classroom to enable students with disability to access and participate in education on the same basis as their peers. You can find all episodes on the NCCD portal. I'm Serpil Senelmis, thanks for listening. |
| Man: | This podcast is supported by the Australian Government Department of Education for the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability or NCCD Portal. Copyright 2019 Education Services Australia Limited unless otherwise indicated, licensed under creative comments attribution 4.0 unless otherwise indicated. |
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| Pamela Snow: | Hello, my name's Professor Pamela Snow. I am a psychologist and speech pathologist and I am the head of the La Trobe Rural Health School. Well, I guess we need to start with language first and we first need to understand that language is a symbolic system, it's a way of representing thoughts, and ideas, and concepts, and language can exist via a number of different media. It can exist through the verbal domain, the spoken domain, but of course it also exists through reading and writing and that's why children who have language difficulties so often also have difficulties in the reading and writing domain. |
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| Pamela Snow: | Yeah. I'm probably thinking more simply than that. Maybe having some key words written down on a piece of paper, having some words highlighted or bolded so if we're giving students instruction on a task that they're going to be doing in the classroom, not just giving these students instructions verbally but also giving them a written backup and maybe highlighting some of the key words that we want them to focus on. |
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| Serpil Senelmis: | These are exactly the types of adjustment that student Bella finds effective and, as a high school student, she's comfortable speaking up to let her teachers know what she needs. |
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| Pamela Snow: | Typically, the way that we think about checking comprehension is by asking someone to repeat back to us their understanding of what we've asked them to do. A problem for students with language disorders is that they may understand what has been asked of them but they may have such fragile verbal skills that they're not able to actually put that into words. |
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| Haley Tancredi: | A really big one, I guess, is around teachers' consciousness of their spoken language. The complexity of the words that they're using when they're explaining concepts, thinking about the way that they structure their sentences, building in additional thinking time and processing time for students. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | Do you mean using shorter sentences and more simple words? |
| Haley Tancredi: | Absolutely. Reduced sentence length. A big part of this is when teachers have content to teach a lot of time goes into preparing the content, but I think there's also a need to stop and think about how that content is going to be shared with the students. Even considering what kinds of examples are going to be given and students will have better access to a smaller number of examples that are explained in a concise way rather than lots of examples which can tend to cause confusion, adjusting the pace of their language and making sure that that is not too fast but also not too slow. |
| Haley Tancredi: | I think the really big one for students with Developmental Language Disorder is repetition. Often when they hear information, they often experience working memory difficulties and so one exposure to that piece of information may not be enough and they might only hear pieces of what's been said. If they can have that repeated a second time, that that's going to help, which also leads to adjustments around providing multiple modes of representing information. |
| Haley Tancredi: | They really do need to understand the foundational level of what you're trying to say directly instead of going about it in a more inflated way, if you like. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | As part of the simplification of language, think about the usability and necessity of new words. |
| Tina Ellis: | I think the really key thing is also about teaching vocabulary that's going to have a breadth of application for the student. It is a very natural thing to want to teach vocabulary to a student that is specific to the topic that we're working on. If we're doing year eight science and we're talking about states of matter, sticking to that vocabulary or that specific genre and that particular task, we want to talk about solids, liquids and gasses and the transfers that happen. |
| Tina Ellis: | Another area of vocabulary that's been shown to be very powerful for students with Developmental Language Disorder is to teach them words that are going to go across all different subject areas. These might be highly descriptive words, so different adjectives that they can use. Also, words that demonstrate the process because some of the processes in science will also be processes that they might experience when they're in food tech or when they're writing in somebody’s paper. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | When it comes to tasks and assessments, teacher Tina Ellis, suggests making more of your time available for students with Developmental Language Disorder. |
| Tina Ellis: | Providing a student with a scaffolded version of a task sheet, it may be a written task, I would go through it with them. If they had difficulty with writing their sentences, I would scribe for them while they spoke. Offering them a reader or a scribe are two adjustments which I've found to be quite effective. With regards to the actual piece of assessment, I would try to make sure that the task is visually simple so that it is not a complex task which is too wordy as well and just reducing the quantity of elements on one page will help them as well. |
| Tina Ellis: | I would also let the student know early on that they are eligible for extra time so if they require extra time that that is quite okay, and assess against the achievement standard so that we're actually assessing what we're supposed to be assessing and not testing for the sake of testing without having a purpose. Even if you looked at the discipline of students that have difficulty with times tables or addition, subtraction, we would give them the tables so that they could just focus on the equations that had to do, eliminating that processing of the tables because that's something they find difficult, sometimes because of memory. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | Students with Developmental Language Disorder really need to work quite closely with their teachers. |
| Pamela Snow: | I guess it's particularly important they have a strong relationship with their teachers because they can be very good at going under the radar and being something of a chameleon. By the time they get to school that they, and particularly to high school, they've often got well developed strategies to be able to stay under the radar and they've got an experience of not always understanding what people are saying to them. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | Of course, teachers will benefit from a good working relationship with parents and carers as well. |
| Haley Tancredi: | The parents will also have a bit of an idea of what kinds of adjustments regarding environment would be beneficial for their child because they know them well. Ultimately, you really want that communication between all stakeholders so the student, the parents, the teachers, and the support staff so that everyone is on the same page. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | How often should teachers be reviewing the adjustments that they've put in place and making changes to their teaching approach? |
| Haley Tancredi: | I would say, really you need to be regularly monitoring your adjustments and keeping a note of your reflective practice so what are you doing for the student? What worked, what didn't? Be honest. If it's not going to work, then write it down so that next time, that didn't work last time, how can I adapt to the situation now? Very much, adjustments need to be noted on the unit plan of what you intend to do but be flexible with how you go forward. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | In summing up, teacher Tina Ellis reminds us what it's all about. |
| Tina Ellis: | I believe that student voice is paramount. We need to be listening to the student and what their needs are, if they can articulate them. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | Bella's mom, Kylie, agrees and recommends preparing early to ensure a seamless experience for students. |
| Kylie: | I would say, form a partnership with the student, form a partnership with the parent. Have some basic strategies that you implement for all students and then tailor it to students' individual needs. Make it as easy as you can for the teacher and for the student as well but plan from the onset. Don't try to retrofit things or change things for the student. Look at what are the barriers before you start. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | What's your advice, Bella, for teachers who have a student like yourself? |
| Bella: | I would say learn all about them and what they think works and what they find hard. Learn different strategies to make language and formatting easier for people to understand. Try out different fonts and strategies and ask the student what works best for them. |
| Serpil Senelmis: | This podcast is part of a series that highlights adjustments that could be made in the classroom to enable students with disability to access and participate in education on the same basis as their peers. You can find all episodes on the NCCD portal. I'm Serpil Senelmis, thanks for listening. |
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