

Language Support Model

Document 3



MONITORING COMPREHENSION : for Teachers

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INTRODUCTION

In order to help a child comprehend talk in class, and monitor their own comprehension, two aspects are important:

- Making sure that the talk heard by a child is **clear and focused**.
- Making sure that a child **knows how to listen**, and **asks** when he or she does not understand.

Many children with language impairment will have difficulty in 'keeping on track' when listening in classrooms. There can be many reasons for this, but we are tackling the problem by helping the children to:

- **recognise that they have not understood completely**, and to
- **indicate when there is a problem**.

This is based on the work of Maggie Johnson (2000) who adapted research by Dollaghan and Kaston (1986).

RATIONALE FOR COMPREHENSION MONITORING

There are times when children do not fully understand what they have been told. This can occur for a number of reasons, to do with the **speaker** or the child **listener**.

Speaker problems include:

- The message may be too long or too complex.
- The speaker may use vocabulary unknown to the child.
- The speaker may not speak clearly (talk too quietly, too quickly etc.).
- Background noise may be present, causing a distraction.
- The speaker may not give the child enough information.

Child listener problems include:

- The child may not look at the speaker, and miss information.
- The child may not listen to the speaker.
- The child may not be able to process the length or complexity of the speaker's talk.

What is important for the child is not that they understand everything they hear but that they are able to **recognise times they do not understand** and learn to **do something about it**. Most children learn to do this naturally, but language impaired children can find it difficult. Much of what they hear may not make sense to them and they may feel it is their 'fault' that they do not understand. They do not want to appear 'silly' in front of their class or teachers, and therefore do not say anything. This does not allow the speaker to give clarification to help the situation.

Work on comprehension monitoring aims to ensure that children learn to recognise times when they have not understood, and that they learn to act upon this realisation. This involves the child **letting the speaker know** that they have not understood and **asking for clarification**.

HELPING CHILDREN TO MONITOR THEIR COMPREHENSION

The SLT will suggest that you:

- 1 Encourage identification of times when communication **breaks down**, and
- 2 Introduce the idea of communication breakdown as due to **speaker** problems.

Sample strategies and activities will be provided, such as:

- Making a 'good talking, good listening' **wall poster** for the whole class.
- Using pictures in a group, taking turns to turn over a picture and model what is on it. The other is to guess if it shows 'good' or 'bad' **examples of listening** (compare *sitting still* with *fidgeting*; *not looking* with *looking* and so on).
- Discussing **speaker** problems, such as talking 'too fast', 'too quietly'. Modelling some of these. Talking against taped music.

- Discussing **speaker** problems, such as not giving enough information. Giving and discussing complete and incomplete instructions, and thinking about why we can't carry some out. Encouraging the child to explain the problem rather than guessing what to do.
- Discussing **long** messages and **unfamiliar** words.
- Playing **games** to practice spotting messages that are too long, and messages with 'hard' words in them and so on.

The SLT will suggest that you then:

3 Point out that it is **not the child's fault** if they are not understanding. This makes it easier for the child to ask for help, and they can feel less self-conscious.

4 Introduce ideas about **what the child is to do** when they do not understand in class.

Sample strategies and activities will be provided, such as:

- Discussing the fact that it is **no-one's 'fault'** if we are not understanding.
- Discussing the fact that we **need ways to tell** people we have not understood.
- Explaining **what to do** when we don't understand, and what happens if the child explains/does not explain this to adults.
- Giving the child ways of **saying** that they have not understood. Saying '*Sorry?*' is an easy way and is usually appropriate. Suggesting also that the child uses phrases like '*Can you repeat that?*', and '*Can you say that slowly please?*'.
- Making sure the child knows **it is 'OK'** to use these phrases in the classroom. It is very hard for a child to do this.
- **Practising** ways to tell people we have not understood.
- Playing **games** where asking for clarification is rewarded.

The SLT will suggest that from then on you move to activities that permeate the classroom.

General Classroom Activities:

- Having the child **repeat instructions back** to demonstrate they have been able to follow .
- Asking the child '*Now what have you got to do?*' and having the child **repeat the instruction**.
- Encouraging the child to **write a note** of key words in an instruction, if they can write, or to repeat them silently to help them remember.
- Remembering to **use the guidance** on 'Communication Friendly' classrooms to ensure the child hears appropriate language.

Specific ideas and activities are listed in the 'Comprehension Monitoring Activities' section that follows, page 6.

REFERENCES

DOLLAGHAN, C., and KASTON. N., 1986, A comprehension monitoring program for language impaired children. *Journal of Speech and Hearing Disorders*, **51**, 264 - 271.

JOHNSON, M., 2000, Promoting understanding of the spoken word through active listening. *Conference of the National Association of Professionals Concerned with Language Impairment in Children (NAPLIC)*.

COMPREHENSION MONITORING ACTIVITIES

This section gives information on activities that can be carried out to help children learn to monitor their comprehension (understanding) of language. Older children may require less time to be spent on each section, younger children may need more repetition of tasks to practice identifying and solving communication problems. They are in the form of 'brainstorming' activities, teacher-led discussions and games, with examples of teaching points and 'scripts', and can be used with groups, classes or individual children.

1. Discussion Of Activities

Why we are doing this.

- It is important that the child understands why they are carrying out comprehension monitoring activities.
- It is worth explaining that these activities will help with 'good listening' and 'good talking'.
- Explain that some work on this will be done every day/every other day for a short time.
- Throughout the activities, it is important to keep recapping on what has been done previously – e.g. reminding child what was done the day before, getting them to tell you what was done in the last session.

2. Listener Problems

BRAINSTORM 1: THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING A GOOD LISTENER

Why is it important to be a good listener?

- So we can understand people.
- Because it is not nice for other people if you don't listen to what they say (you don't like it if you are ignored when you are talking).
- The child may have further ideas

BRAINSTORM 2: HOW TO BE A GOOD LISTENER

What can we do to be good listeners?

- Get the child to try and identify some skills for good listening. These include sitting still, looking at the speaker, not talking, listening well, thinking about what is said, not daydreaming and so on.
- Similarly, think about things that would not help, such as fidgeting, listening to music, looking out of the window, talking.
- Introduce the Boardmaker™ picture prompts for each of these behaviours. Make sure the child knows what each one represents and whether it is a 'good thing' or a 'bad thing' for listening.

LISTENING ACTIVITIES

- MODELLING - use Boardmaker™ or similar pictures and take turns to choose one and try and act out the behaviour on it. See if the other person(s) can work out what it is.
- LIST – make a list of the behaviours, or make a poster using the pictures. These can either be extended to group/ whole class use or kept small for an individual child's reference. They can be sorted into good/bad behaviours for listening.
- TARGET – the child (or the adult) sets a target for the week, for example 'This week I am going to be good at (sitting/looking/thinking)'. A reward or point can be given at the end of the week if this is achieved. When prompting better behaviour, try to get the child to identify the problem, saying: 'Oh-oh what happened there?'

3. Speaker Problems in Communication Breakdown (a Very Important Idea!)

Having now developed the idea of how the child can best listen to speech around them, we want to encourage the child to take more responsibility for their understanding and to explain to them:

- that it is 'OK' not to understand, and
- that they can and should ask for help or clarification.

To do this, we get the adult to show that problems often arise from the speaker, and as such are not the child's 'fault'.

BRAINSTORM 3: WHY SPEAKERS CAN MAKE IT HARD TO UNDERSTAND

How can speakers make things hard for listeners? Because:

- You might be doing all the things we have talked about to help you to listen, but the person who is talking to you does something that makes it hard to understand them. Your friend or the teacher or another grown up might do this.
- Say 'Let's think about some of the things people can do that make it hard to understand them.' See if the child can identify any behaviours.
- Develop the child's ideas as well as discussing the following common problems:

Rate; Volume of talk (and background noise); Missing out relevant information, Length of talk; Vocabulary used.

'PROBLEM TALK' ACTIVITIES

- **RATE** – Say: 'I might talk really, really fast so you don't know what I'm saying'. Demonstrate this, talking very fast.
- **VOLUME** – Say: 'I might talk so quietly that you can't hear me, or there might be noise so you can't hear me, like a cough or a yawn. Demonstrate this, talking quietly and with yawns and coughs.
- **BACKGROUND NOISE** is also a factor that may be discussed at this stage. This affects what the listener hears but it is not the fault of the speaker or the listener. Use tape-recorded noise (music or 'hubbub') to show this.
- **INSTRUCTIONS** – give the child a range of instructions to carry out – some too fast, some too quiet (or with a cough over a key word) and some that the child can do. See if they can spot the problem, and ask what the adult could do to make it a 'good' instruction.

- NOT ENOUGH INFORMATION – explain to the child that there can be another problem – they might not be told enough information, so that what they are asked to do might not make sense. Explain that sometimes people forget to give enough information or they think that you already know something, so they don't tell you.
- IMPOSSIBILITIES – have a selection of small items (for example pens, toy cars, pencils), some of which should be the same colour and the same size. An array could be for example a red pen, a long red pencil, a short red pencil, a red beanbag and a blue beanbag. Give a range of instructions to be done with the objects – some impossible, some do-able such as:
 - . 'Give me the red *one*', (not specific – omits the object type)
 - . 'Give me *the* pencil/beanbag', (not specific – omits the colour)
 - . Give *that* to me' (impossible – not specific)
 - . Give me the pencil (not specific – omits the object length)
 - . Give me the long pencil (do-able)
 - . Give me the blue one (do-able)

Adding more objects (such as another blue item) changes the 'do-ability' of instructions. Make a point of blaming the adult for impossible instructions, saying: 'Silly me – I should have given you more information...') You can add a board game to make it 'fun'.

Take turns – the child can practice giving instructions also. Discuss how to give good instructions that can be carried out.

- LENGTH OF INSTRUCTION: the speaker might use a really long sentence, so the listener cannot remember it. Say: 'For example, I might say, can you tell the teacher in room 6 that you won't be in tomorrow after two o'clock because your mum says you have to go to your gran's house after going to the doctors. That was a really long message. Long messages can be hard to understand because there is so much to remember'.

The adult then gives instructions with a mix of 'easy' and 'too long' sentences. The child is to indicate that the message was too long and say whether or not they could do the instruction. The child will not necessarily seek a repetition or clarification at this stage, they will just indicate a communication breakdown.

- VOCABULARY: the person talking might use a word we do not know Say: 'For example...if I asked you to draw me a picture of a *herbivore*, would you be able to do it? Or what if I asked you to tell me what an *ophthalmologist* does? Those might be words that not everyone knows, so not everyone

would be able to do what I asked'. Play a game to practice spotting messages with 'hard' words in them

IDENTIFYING ALL SPEAKER PROBLEMS – PRACTICE ACTIVITIES

- Explain that you will be using games to practice all the things the child has found out about messages, and that they could be too fast, too quiet, missing information, too long or have too hard words. Play a board game here the adult gives child an instruction and if the child completes the instruction correctly they get to move on one space. If the child can identify why they can not complete the instruction (i.e. identify the speaker problem) they also get to move on a space. The adult should use instructions which vary according to the speaker problems listed. If necessary, prompt the child, asking 'Can you do that one?'

4. Seeking Clarification

Having identified the difficulties that can occur from both a listener and a speaker perspective, we need to make sure that the child has some strategies in place to seek clarification or repetition.

This is **the key** point of comprehension monitoring work – getting the child to actively seek clarification and checking their own understanding, so that they do not sit quietly hoping not to be chosen or noticed.

BRAINSTORM 4

What could we do if we do not understand?

Encourage the child to think of some things they could say or do if they do not understand. It may help to give them some scenarios (for example say something that is too fast or too long).

- LIST – the actions or questions the child comes up with to use as a reference list in the future. Good examples of clarification questions to teach include:
 - . Could you say that again please?
 - . Could you say that more slowly please?
 - . Could you say that a little bit at a time please?
 - . I don't understand that
 - . Could you tell me what that means?
 - . Sorry?

The child may well be using some of these terms already, but it is worth doing some extra practice of them and making them explicit.

CLARIFICATION PRACTICE ACTIVITIES

- BARRIER GAME- have two copies of a detailed picture, and a selection of pens and pencils. Colour in one copy and keep it hidden. Give the child the other picture and give instructions about which bit to colour in. Some instructions should be correct and do-able, but others can be too long, too quiet, have a cough or other noise making them, have not enough information or use difficult vocabulary.

For example, say:

- . Colour that bit (not enough information).
- . Colour his head fuchsia (difficult vocabulary needs pink)
- . Use the blue one to colour his feet (not a specific choice of light or dark blue)
- . After you pick up the light green pen then you should take the top off of it and then put it down on the table beside the red one and the put the top back on and then get the yellow one and use that one to colour in the hair (too long).

Encourage the child to ask for clarification – the idea is that their picture should look identical to yours. If they guess, they are more likely to make mistakes. This activity can be repeated with several different pictures to allow for practice of asking for clarification.

- SIMON SAYS – play a variation of ‘Simon Says’ using a range of good and bad instructions. For example, touch your nose; touch your cranium; before you touch your elbow you have to stand on one leg and then turn around 4 times and then clap your hands once but before that you should say your name out loud and then wave your left hand. Again encourage the child to use their new skills to ask for clarification.

5. SUMMARY

The child should now be more aware of the skills needed for good listening and ways that they can seek clarification or repetition if required. The emphasis should be on them being active and using these skills to help themselves if they need to. This should be reinforced repeatedly through reference to the skills and using a weekly target for them to focus on. Asking questions such as: 'Oh dear what happened there?' rather than saying: 'You weren't listening' also encourages the child to take responsibility for monitoring their own current level of comprehension.