

# Developmental Language Disorder in secondary school



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This guide will explore Developmental Language Disorder in regard to students' transition to secondary school, the learning expectations of secondary education, and their ongoing language and learning difficulties. It will also describe how teachers can support students with DLD in the secondary school classroom through the use of key strategies and collaborative intervention.

Secondary school can be a particularly challenging time for students with [Developmental Language Disorder](#) (DLD), as language difficulties continue to impact their learning and their behavioural, social, emotional, and mental wellbeing. DLD is a language disorder with no known cause and can be identified by challenges in understanding and expressing language, with difficulties in core areas including phonology, grammar, language use, and verbal learning and memory. It often co-occurs with significant difficulties in reading and writing, attention, [sensory processing differences](#), and other behavioural, emotional, and learning difficulties<sup>1</sup>. DLD is differentiated from the term 'language disorder', which relates to a child with a known biomedical condition such as autism, intellectual disability, or sensorineural hearing loss.<sup>2</sup> DLD is present in 7% of students and can be as high as 16%, impacting a student's language journey from preschool through to secondary school and into adulthood.

## Teacher observation checklist

Teachers can use the following characteristics to identify ongoing learning problems related to language and literacy for students at secondary school.

**Verbal and written expression difficulties** may be demonstrated by a student's:

- limited depth of vocabulary, use of non-specific language (stuff, thing, it), and repeated phrases (and then... and then)
- shorter and less sophisticated sentence ideas (such as sentences containing limited use of conjunctions and basic patterns of thought)
- errors in grammar (such as verb tense) and syntax (such as incorrect sentence structure)
- lack of initiation and output in writing tasks – for example, students fail to get started independently, and are less able to expand on their ideas
- ineffective note-taking from the whiteboard or by dictation
- poor spelling ability and avoidance of writing longer or unfamiliar words
- limited use of language techniques such as figurative language in poetry, creative writing, and narrative text
- basic or poor structuring ideas for persuasive writing, expositions, instructions, or reports
- challenges in understanding the social rules of language, such as using informal language in a formal situation
- ineffective use of key words when doing internet research, highlighting key ideas, or taking notes

In addition to the academic challenges they present, these difficulties may also lead to listener confusion or frustration among the student's peers, teachers, and parents. This can in turn result in reduced classroom participation, social exclusion, and poor behaviour as students struggle to manage their what is required of them in the classroom.

**Difficulties in listening and reading comprehension** may become apparent in a student's:

- ongoing reading difficulties, continuing to focus on decoding and accuracy rather than reading for meaning
- inability to effectively process and retrieve information, and respond to answers immediately in class tasks
- inability to follow multi-step instructions (remembering, sequencing, and putting into action multiple steps)
- inability to accurately read, analyse, recall, and apply information and knowledge
- inability to complete inferencing tasks and understand figurative language
- misinterpretation of social forms such as sarcasm, hints, jokes, and double meanings

These difficulties lead to disengagement and students often falling behind in new curriculum content and concepts. They can be perceived as uncooperative because they require more time to process information, and provide incomplete work with repeated errors and irrelevant answers. They may also be interpreted as rude or disrespectful due to breakdowns in communication.

## Profile of DLD prior to secondary school

The trajectory of language development is a lifelong process that begins from birth and follows rapid patterns of growth in the early years towards establishing and maintaining abilities in later years. Students with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) do not move easily along this pathway of growth<sup>3</sup>. Children with DLD are often diagnosed when they start primary school or during their primary school years, but some are not identified until they are in the secondary school learning environment. These students will have persistent difficulties in language and learning across narrative language, written language and spelling, following and understanding spoken instructions, engaging in reciprocal conversations, memory, and executive functioning.

## Typical language development in adolescence

Students' continued language development during adolescence plays a critical role in their academic and personal development<sup>4</sup>. In secondary school, there are increased demands across the academic, social, and cognitive domains of language, and increased challenge in regard to verbal and written expression, as well as listening and reading comprehension.

In the **academic domain of language**, the use and complexity of instructional vocabulary increases, and students need to be able to understand and respond to terms like illustrate, analyse, explain, demonstrate, and discuss as they are used in assignments, homework tasks, and exams. Students also need to be aware of discipline-specific language, with the same words being used to mean different things in different subject areas. Students' use of written language also becomes increasingly sophisticated in terms of both skills such as spelling and sentence structure as well the structure and style of writing for different purposes and disciplines.

In the **social domain of language**, the initiation and maintenance of peer interactions and relationships relies on increasingly sophisticated language during adolescence. Students need to be able to adapt their language and communicative style to a variety of contexts, including different peer groups, social media, and both formal and informal social situations (such as interacting with a sports coach or classroom teacher compared with social interactions at home). They also need to recognise and understand sarcasm, idioms, slang, jokes, and inferencing or 'reading between the lines'. Students need to be able to actively participate in social learning, such as discussions, debates, group work, all of which facilitate positive peer interactions and learning opportunities but can be highly challenging for students with DLD.

In the **cognitive domain of language**, secondary school increasingly calls for abstract thinking, such as when making a hypothesis, forming opinions, extracting information (research or note taking), and making predictions. There are greater demands on students' metacognitive skills in terms of planning, reflection, self-assessment, self-talk, developing and using processes, and summarising and synthesising information, and cognitive flexibility is required to consider possible alternatives and engage in problem solving. Students also need to be able to regulate their emotions.

## Transition to secondary school

For all students, a positive [transition to secondary school](#) is influenced by the levels of support provided by the school, the formation and continuation of friendship networks, and the student's social emotional competence and positive anticipation of starting at a new school. School attendance and participation in learning are precursors of success and are linked to higher self-esteem, greater confidence, and greater academic progress in secondary school<sup>5</sup>. While many students look forward to the new experiences and opportunities of secondary school, some are apprehensive about the transition, notably those with learning difficulties including DLD.

Students diagnosed with DLD are faced with new challenges when they reach secondary school, despite many appearing to meet expectations in primary school after receiving additional support for language and literacy, and their underlying language challenges again become evident with the increasing academic, social, and cognitive demands of secondary school. They are likely to be disadvantaged in their learning compared to their neurotypical peers, and show significant differences in reading comprehension, written language production, and spelling outcomes<sup>6</sup>. Between 17% and 50% of students with DLD also having a reading disability<sup>7</sup>, and these language difficulties affect the student's ability to engage fully in academic work. This impacts their self-esteem and their belief in their ability to succeed academically at secondary school, and heightens their apprehension about the new school environment, workload expectations, and teachers that come with secondary school.

Language difficulties also affect their social behaviour and the quality of their friendships, and secondary school students with underlying language and literacy impairments are often overrepresented in statistics of poor behaviour and mental health<sup>8</sup>. A student's voice is an important factor during school transition and can provide a meaningful account of their personal and educational journeys. Listening and talking to students during their transition to secondary school can inform teachers and parents about what their perceptions are and give insight into what strategies could support them.

## Classroom strategies for supporting students with DLD

There are a number of strategies that teachers can employ in the classroom to ameliorate some of the more common challenges experienced by students with DLD and support them to succeed academically and socially<sup>9</sup>.

## Modify the teacher's use of oral and written language when providing instructions and curricular information

There are a number of ways to adapt the way verbal information is presented that can make it easier for students with DLD to access, such as reducing the length of instructions and including just one idea per sentence. When presenting new and important information, and it is valuable to provide it in additional ways alongside written material. For example, teachers can talk it through with students to activate background knowledge and check for understanding, and discuss key words and synonyms. Demonstrating the effective use of key words when using a search engine for research, scaffolding the highlighting of keywords, and using synonyms and descriptions to aid definitions and understanding can also support a student's understanding of and ability to remember key vocabulary.

- Teachers can use auditory tools and aids such as audio books alongside written information and activities, and provide access to digital tools like screen readers and text-to-talk apps where appropriate. It is also helpful to increase students' access to visual representations of ideas and information to support oral and written work, such as drawing a diagram alongside written information or instructions on the board, or showing a relevant video clip.

## Adjust tasks, activities, and programmes

The use of visual techniques can benefit students with DLD, such as building the use of images, graphics, colour, highlighting, and colour coding into literacy programmes, or using visual maps to develop understanding of concepts. It is also useful to provide a range of tools to support students' working memory, such as calculators, fact sheets, charts, process maps, flow charts, big picture maps, and spelling supports. Follow-up activities can be used to help students develop their mastery of knowledge and skills, such as instructional games, peer-teaching activities, practice sheets, Quizlets, and online programmes.

Sometimes it may be appropriate to offer alternative ways for students to show their mastery of material besides written tasks, such as oral or video presentations, dioramas, collages, debates, mind maps, storyboards, slide presentations, or information set out in bullet points. It can also be valuable to allow for flexible timeframes, such as providing additional time to read through written instructions or materials, offering copies of reading material, texts, worksheets, or links to online work in advance, and teaching key vocabulary and big ideas for upcoming units of work ahead of time. This can promote students' successful engagement in learning and also reduce their anxiety.

## Facilitate executive function skills

[Executive function skills](#) are essential for all students but supporting their development is particularly beneficial for neurodivergent students, including those with DLD. There are many ways that teachers can build the explicit teaching of executive function into their regular programmes. Teachers can support students to understand the limitations of working memory, and model the use of effective memory strategies to support the recall of words, ideas, and concepts, such as mnemonic spelling strategies, [retrieval practice](#), chunking information, dual coding, and word association (thus reducing the load on working memory). They can also teach students about effective note-taking strategies by modelling the use of mind maps or storyboards, sticky notes, images and symbols, bookmarking tools, annotating tools, highlighting, annotating, rewriting, and summarising with a peer.

Another way to support executive function is to promote students' metacognitive awareness of their progress and achievement by supporting emotional regulation and teaching effective goal-setting and planning. For example, teachers might encourage the use self-talk or reflective questions, such as 'Have

I done this before? How did I tackle it? What did I find easy? What was difficult/easy? What did I learn?'. Teachers can also encourage students to think about how they can maximise their attention in the classroom and inhibit their response to distractions by providing options such as sitting with others or on their own, using headphones, or finding a quiet space to work. For more information on how to develop executive function skills in secondary school, click [here](#).

### Schoolwide support for students with DLD

Students benefit from ongoing support in secondary school across a tiered intervention approach<sup>10</sup>.

This allows schools to address new challenges that arise in language, learning, emotional, behavioural, and social contexts, and supports a positive trajectory for tertiary education, employment, emotional and mental wellbeing and relationships into adulthood. Interventions should also be culturally responsiveness in their implementation and interpretation of approaches when working with a student and their family.

**Tier 1 – Universal: Evidence-based literacy teaching and learning.** A whole classroom approach that benefits [neurodivergent students](#) like those with DLD by drawing on collaboration between internal school support, including teachers, counsellors, and learning support, alongside external support such as speech pathologists, psychologists, and occupational therapists. This approach supports:

- The exchange of ideas resulting in a strong working relationship between professionals
- The transfer of key information about students' communication needs into the classroom
- Teachers to use strategies across different class groups for their specific subject
- Curricular content to be relevant to specialist therapy goals

**Tier 2 – Targeted: Deliberate and direct approach** to support students with more intense and specific intervention in small groups, usually related to academic outcomes such as literacy or numeracy.

**Tier 3 – Individualised: Tailored supports for the specific needs of students** lead by specialist teachers, speech language therapists, counsellors, or occupational therapists to provide one on one individualised programmes for:

- emotional regulation and behaviour
- language skills
- writing organisation and/or spelling
- reading skills
- social skills
- mental health and wellbeing

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### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Bishop, D. V., Clark, B., Conti-Ramsden, G., Norbury, C. F., & Snowling, M. J. (2012). RALLI: An internet campaign for raising awareness of language learning impairments. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*, 28(3), 259–262, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265659012459467>; Bishop, D.V.M, Snowling, M.J., Thompson, P.A., Greenhalgh, T., CATALISE consortium (2016). CATALISE: A multinational

and multidisciplinary Delphi Consensus Study. Identifying language impairments in children. PLoS ONE 11(7).

- 2 Ziegenfusz, S., Paynter, J., Flückiger, B. & Westerveld, M. (2022). A systematic review of the academic achievement of primary and secondary school-aged students with developmental language disorder. *Autism & Developmental Language Impairments*, 7(1-33) <https://doi.org/10.1177/2396941522109939>; Bishop et al., 2016.
- 3 Kenyon, S. M. G., Lucas, R. M., & Palikara, O. (2019). Expectations of the transition to secondary school in children with Developmental Language Disorder and low language ability. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 90(2), 249-265, <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12292>; Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (2020). RCSLT briefing paper on Language Disorder with a specific focus on Developmental Language Disorder; Bishop et al, 2016.
- 4 Starling, J. (2016). Link-S: Linking language with secondary school learning. Julia Starling Speech-Language Learning Centre; Devon County Council (2022). Supporting young people with SLCN in Secondary Schools.
- 5 Kenyon et al., 2019.
- 6 Starling et al., 2011; Kenyon et al., 2019.
- 7 Ziegenfusz et al., 2022; Snowling, M. J., Duff, F. J., Nash, H., M., & Hulme, C. (2016). Language profiles and literacy outcomes of children with resolving, emerging, or persisting language impairments. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 57(12), 1360–1369, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26681150/>.
- 8 Starling, J., Munro, N., Togher, L., & Arciuli, J. (2011). Recognising language impairment in secondary school student populations. *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*, 16(2), 145-158, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/19404158.2011.586712>.
- 9 Starling, 2016; Ministry of Education (2020). About dyslexia: Supporting literacy in the classroom. Wellington: Crown.
- 10 Ministry of Education (2020). Response to Intervention – Tiered support model.
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## Further Reading

Links Resources (n.d) Linking Language with Middle and Upper Primary and Secondary School Learning (LINK-UP and LINK-S) Program Manuals: Resources for Speech Pathologists.

PREPARED FOR THE EDUCATION HUB BY



### Vanessa Leaver

Vanessa Leaver is a Speech Language Therapist, business owner, and mum to two young children. Over the last 10 years she has been the founder of private practice clinics in Tokyo and Sydney, where she led teams undertaking clinical practice in early childhood settings as well as primary and high school settings. Now based in Auckland, Vanessa is passionate about using her knowledge in executive functioning with literacy and language to work alongside teachers, parents, caregivers, and professionals to support a child or young person's development.