

Enriching vocabulary and phonological awareness

Michael Jones looks at the use of the Lexion software programme to assess and support children with dyslexia

Many SLTs will know from experience that there is a link between speech and language difficulties in children and their subsequent reading and spelling problems.

Recent research (Snowling and Hayiou-Thomas, 2006) confirms this, and primary school teachers are fast becoming aware of the need to provide high quality and well-planned support for children's speaking and listening.

While the English National Curriculum emphasises speaking and listening as an integral part of literacy teaching, there is still a long way to go before children with communication difficulties will have their needs met as part of everyday classroom activities.

SLT Frances Girling and her SLTA colleague Karen Stephens, from Cornwall County Council's Children, Young People and Families Department, work in Cornish primary schools.

They have been experimenting with a Swedish computer program, Lexion, which seems to provide ideal support for language development, as well as assessing and providing exercises for reading and spelling.

Frances worked for nine years with children and adults with dyslexia, and has a special interest in information technology.

She works closely with Karen in schools that have been targeted as needing support to meet the needs of children with communication difficulties – ranging from those with statements of special educational need to groups needing general support to develop their language knowledge and skills.

One of their major challenges is to conduct assessments children find interesting and will translate into activities that can be used effectively by school staff. Lexion seems to meet most of these requirements.

Designed by Swedish SLTs as part of remediation work with adults with aphasia, Swedish schools now use Lexion extensively to assess and support children with dyslexia.

Lexion is based on the concept that children

with reading and spelling difficulties have two fundamental problems: phonological awareness and phonological processing.

The program has recently undergone standardisation for use in the UK and Ireland.

It assesses children's difficulties in these areas and immediately provides a profile of strengths and weaknesses.

This profile translates into a series of exercises that teach the basic skills of phonological awareness and processing, in a way children from ages six to 15 years of age can enjoy.

Frances has been closely involved in developing Lexion for use in UK schools, and is keen other practitioners know about its value.

"Children enjoy the assessment in a way that is not apparent with most standardised tests. The assessment is invaluable, but we often learn as much again from working with the children on the program and analysing their responses," Frances says.

I observed this for myself when I visited Frances and Karen working in north Cornwall primary schools.

Jane was a nine-year-old girl who was extremely reserved when Karen originally started work with her.

"She would sit on her hands in front of my laptop for as long as 10 minutes, and I had to coax her into interacting with the program," Karen explained.

On the day I visited, Jane quickly loaded the program and was able to navigate her way around her favourite exercises with ease.

Karen attributes Jane's newfound confidence to working with Lexion. "The program automatically sets exercises with exactly the right amount of challenge, in exactly the areas where Jane needs support.

"This has also helped Jane's confidence in speaking, and her parents and teachers are delighted with her progress."

Frances has no doubt there is a link between



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vocabulary development and reading. "I suspect most young children with speech and language difficulties have underlying problems with auditory processing.

"This shows up later as reading and spelling difficulties. Karen and I are constantly trying to make the link between enriching vocabulary and phonological awareness."

This approach fits in with the Rose Report (DfES 2006), which emphasises the need for teachers to provide high quality work on language and phonics.

I saw such high quality work when Karen used Lexion with four five-year-old boys in a language enrichment group.

They were completely focused for 30 minutes on language activities using an interactive whiteboard.

As Karen puts it, "I could have done the same activity with flashcards, but the children would have cooperated for a tenth of the time."

Michael Jones –MRCSLT, is an educational consultant

Visit: www.lexion.co.uk

References:

Rose J. *Independent review of the teaching of early reading* Department for Education and Skills 2006, Available online: www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/phonics/report.pdf
Snowling M, Hayiou-Thomas ME. The dyslexia spectrum: continuities between reading, speech and language impairments. *Topics in Language Disorders* 2006; 26, 108-124.