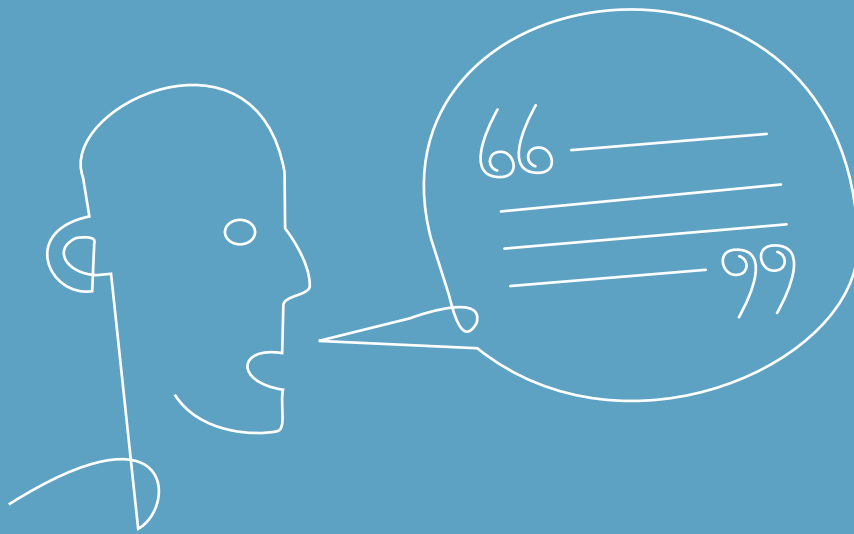# Communication and Language

Guidelines for Teachers of Students with

MILD

General Learning Disabilities

Contents

Rationale and introduction

Language is central to learning. It is the primary tool through which teachers mediate and through which students access the whole curriculum.

Rationale

Language enables individuals to engage socially, initially within the family, and later in an ever-widening network of relationships and cultural experiences. Such experiences create a sense of belonging and enhance general well-being.

Language enables individuals to give expression to their feelings, ideas, and concerns. As they mature, it is through language that they will communicate their personal needs and claim their rightful place in society.

Much of what the student learns and the way he/she learns it comes from the interaction of language and experience. Through naming, describing, classifying, and modifying things and ideas knowledge is extended and the command of language developed. In this way language subsumes experience. Words become the bank in which a growing fund of knowledge and concepts is stored. Thus, language is the medium through which new learning is assimilated and defined.

Introduction

Language is a developmental process for all students

All students with mild general learning disabilities will experience delayed oral language development, and some will also exhibit different patterns in oral language development. Although the *Primary School Curriculum* states that *'the child comes to school with considerable verbal facility'* (English curriculum, page 2), it cannot be assumed that this is true in the case of all students with mild general learning disabilities.

Because of the interrelated nature of oral language and literacy it is of vital importance that the particular communicative and/or oral challenges experienced by students with mild general learning disabilities are identified at an early stage. A speech and language therapist may, in fact, have assessed and worked with the young student before he/she has started school.

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The acquisition of literacy is a central concern for students with mild general learning disabilities. While the core aims, broad objectives, and content of the *Primary School Curriculum* are intended for all students it may be necessary to mediate these in a manner that will take account of the needs of an individual learner. Parents/guardians should be kept fully informed of their children's development and be made aware of any difficulties they are experiencing in achieving literacy. The role of the parent in helping and encouraging the student at home is of vital importance.

For older students who have not been successful in adequately mastering literacy skills, the development of functional reading (social sight vocabulary and reading for 'preservation') and functional writing skills should be promoted, in order to enable these students to participate as fully as possible in society.

The centrality of language

The *Primary School Curriculum* highlights the centrality of language and states, *'The better the student's ability with language the more effectively he/she will learn.'* (*Primary School Curriculum: English, Teacher Guidelines*, page 2). The *Communication and Language Guidelines for Teachers of Students with Mild General Learning Disabilities* are structured in a way that will enable students with mild general learning disabilities to acquire oral language and literacy skills systematically appropriate to their individual abilities.

Language learning is a process in which the skills of oral language, reading, and writing are interrelated. However, for the purposes of this document they will be considered separately. This will support the teacher in recognising the particular needs of individual students and assist him/her in planning and mediating the curriculum to meet these needs.

The greater part of the language experience for the student with mild general learning disabilities is verbal, and it is through oral language activity that much of his/her learning takes place, both within and outside of school. The many challenges experienced in developing an understanding of the world can be compounded by the difficulties experienced in oral language development. Oral language development is, therefore, a priority for such students.

Principles of language learning

The importance of learning *through* language as well as language learning is highlighted in the *Primary School Curriculum*. The *Communication and Language Guidelines for Teachers of Students with Mild General Learning Disabilities* are also informed by the principle of language learning. Access to the overall curriculum for many students with mild general learning disabilities will be determined to a large extent by oral language capabilities.

Points to note

- For most students, the three language skills, oral language, reading and writing, will draw from and feed into one another to form an integrated process of language learning.

- For students with mild general learning disabilities oral language may be the principle means of accessing the curriculum. Due to the fact that a significant number of these students remain longer at the learning to read stage, and progress more slowly to the reading to learn stage in their primary years and beyond, their experience of reading will not necessarily support oral language development to the extent it does for other students.

- There may not be a close relationship between competence in reading and the ability to express oneself in writing because of problems individuals may have in relation to perceptual (spatial and visual) motor development.

Implications for teaching

- In addition to its importance for language learning, oral language is central to mediating the wider dimension of the overall curriculum. Therefore, the oral component of every lesson should be given special consideration.

- New ideas should be introduced orally before being presented in print to students.

- The developmental age and individual strengths and challenges of the student need to be taken account of when considering appropriate reading strategies and selecting materials. Approaches to learning to read should provide appropriate support for the student. Reading texts chosen should have comprehension levels commensurate with the student's oral language skills, and should be age-appropriate.

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- The complexity of structure, vocabulary, and degrees of abstractness of the written language may not match the oral language skills of the student.

- Lesson planning should allow for differentiation of written responses for the student who has particular physical problems in the area of visual-motor control.

- Information and Communication Technologies can play a key role in supporting difficulties in relation to the mechanics of writing (letter formation and spelling), and can thus facilitate creative composition.

- The use of ICT as the sole writing tool may be necessary for the student with specific disabilities that seriously impede handwriting skills. Discussion with the student, his/her parents/guardians, and other relevant parties should take place before this decision is taken.

- A more functional approach, focusing on individual needs, is recommended for the student who has serious difficulties in acquiring oral language and reading and writing skills.

Structure of the communication and language guidelines

These guidelines will follow the structure of the *Primary School Curriculum* in terms of strands and strand units. However, due to the particular need to promote oral competence as stated in the previous section, the initial focus is on the area of oral language development in each of the four strands of the English language curriculum:

- Receptiveness to language

- Competence and confidence in using language

- Developing cognitive abilities through language

- Emotional and imaginative development through language.

The development of reading and writing skills will be addressed subsequently under the same four strands.

Central to these guidelines is a responsive framework detailing possible areas of difficulty and the implications of these for both oral language and literacy development. Appropriate teaching strategies to address the possible areas of difficulty are suggested. These areas are addressed in relation to the four strands of the English curriculum. (See the *Approaches and methodologies* section.)

The teacher will use the responsive framework to compile both an oral language profile and a literacy profile for each student.

Patterns of oral language development

An awareness of the implications for learning of particular difficulties that students with mild general learning disabilities experience, accompanied by the provision of possible teaching strategies, will assist the teacher in providing differentiated content and materials that will facilitate the development of students' skills and competencies to their fullest extent.

General profile

Oral language learning development is variable for every student depending on personal, social, and cultural experiences. Some students with mild general learning disabilities will talk a lot despite quite significant difficulties with comprehension, while others will say very little. The following paragraphs outline some potential areas of difficulty. Some students will experience just one of these difficulties while others may experience several.

Some potential areas of difficulty for students in relation to language

Differences in reaching milestones

Students with mild general learning disabilities are frequently described as mastering speech and language milestones at a later stage, but in the same general developmental sequence, as peers of the same age. This delayed development, however, does not imply that these students will eventually catch up on their peers.

Differing acquisition profiles

The speech and language assessment profiles for some of these students will indicate that both the rate of language development and the sequence of

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language acquisition differ. Whereas one student may have strengths in the area of communication and have serious articulation difficulties, another may speak very clearly but be a poor communicator.

Developing from the concrete to the abstract

Students with mild general learning disabilities will tend to use shorter, less complex sentences with more immature articulation patterns. The vocabulary used will be mainly concrete and they are more likely to talk about themselves or to talk repeatedly about the same subject.

Specific problems with communicative competence

Students who have specific difficulties in establishing and maintaining eye contact, in interpreting facial cues, or in acknowledging or understanding another's emotional state will have resulting difficulties in effecting meaningful communication. They may not recognise that a breakdown in communication has occurred and, even when they do, may lack the skills necessary to rectify or repair the situation.

Sensory and physical challenges

Students with mild general learning disabilities are not a homogenous group. Individual profiles will vary and may be complicated by additional sensory or physical disabilities.

Particular diagnoses and oral language development

A specific area of difficulty may be diagnosed in the case of some students with mild general learning disabilities. In other cases no such specific difficulty may be diagnosed. It is important that teachers and other professionals are aware of the implications of a given diagnosis for the individual student's language development.

Patterns of literacy development

General profile

All students will bring a combination of skills, strengths, and limitations to the task of reading.

Difficulty with oral language contributes to the struggle with literacy. The terminology used by the teacher in the teaching of reading and writing can in itself be a challenge for the student with delayed oral language development. Much of the vocabulary used to describe details of the reading and writing processes can be abstract and highly conceptual in nature (for example, 'word' or 'sentence'), or can have another meaning in general use which can confuse the learner.

Students may have difficulty in understanding the language of books in relation to those books or texts they read themselves, or material that is being read to them. The meanings conveyed (at word level and sentence level) may be beyond their direct experience, or the structure of the sentences may be too complex or too lengthy to follow.

Since students with mild general learning disabilities may take considerably longer than their peers to achieve independent reading and writing skills, much praise and positive reinforcement is needed in order to encourage them to persevere in the acquisition of these skills. Difficulties experienced by the student in the acquisition of literacy skills should be put into the context of successful achievements they have experienced in other areas of the curriculum.

Students should be included in discussions relating to their own particular difficulties and the setting of realistic achievable learning targets.

The approaches and methodologies used in the student's earliest experiences of literacy should be pitched at a level that is appropriate to the student's age and stage of development. In addition, support materials used should be attractive and interesting, in order to encourage the student to engage in the literacy activities.

In general, students link new knowledge to knowledge that has been previously learned. The student, therefore, is active in the learning process. A significant amount of learning also occurs incidentally, either within or outside a normal class lesson.

However, the student with mild general learning disabilities may experience problems making such connections and it cannot be assumed that learning is taking place incidentally, as it may do with other students.

Without explicit instruction the student may not automatically make connections between the spoken word and the written word. This will influence the approach to literacy employed by the teacher. It is important that the student is enabled to understand the global concept of reading. This can often be overlooked because some students may learn very slowly and too much emphasis may be placed on understanding the component parts of the process rather than on the overall message of the text.

Skills required in the reading process
The skills a student needs for reading are

- scanning from left to right

- recognising words and understanding punctuation marks

- interpreting the written word aloud or internally at a pace suitable for comprehending the text (the student should be presented with sight vocabulary with which he/she is familiar)

- creating meaningful units from words and combinations of words, and following long and maybe complicated sentences that may involve self-correcting, re-reading, and guessing from contextual clues

- following the sequence of ideas and retaining meaning

- connecting new meanings with what is known already.

Having regard to the skills required, the following are some of the possible difficulties that may be encountered by students with mild general learning disabilities:

- Visual and/or auditory memory may be impaired to a greater or lesser degree.

- The student may be easily confused by minimal differences.

- There may be problems with phonemic awareness, whereby a student cannot retain the word at auditory level. This will result in subsequent difficulty in engaging in the abstract task of examining sounds within words (synthesis or analysis).

- He/she may have difficulty identifying the central meaning of, or making inferences from, a piece of text.

- Students may be unable to make use of prior knowledge when tackling the task.

It is important that the teacher is aware of any sensory or physical constraints that may affect the acquisition of these skills.

Delayed gross and fine motor skills will also impact on the student's writing skills. The student may encounter problems and frustrations with letter formation in terms of scale, spacing, and orientation. Hand dominance may develop late and many students experience confusion with the left-to-right aspects of reading and writing, resulting, for example, in mirror image writing. Some students may experience difficulty with physically manipulating and spatially organising literacy materials, for example turning one page at a time.

School planning

Addressing the particular needs of individual students involves planning at a whole-school level.

Curriculum planning

A structure for planning

Establishing a whole-school approach to curriculum planning and assessment for language will include consideration of the following:

- assessing the existing oral language and literacy skills of those students with mild general learning disabilities

- identifying particular oral language and literacy learning needs

- differentiating in order to meet the needs of individual students

- targeting enabling skills

- examining the collaborative role of all relevant professionals: the principal, the class teacher, the resource teacher, the special needs assistant and the speech and language therapist

- planning for learning in a variety of contexts or situations involving either adult or peer partners

- planning for parental participation

- evaluating the effectiveness of the school plan in providing opportunities for oral language and literacy learning

- monitoring student progress in specific skills.

Curriculum planning for oral language

Communication is of paramount importance for students with mild general learning disabilities. It is necessary, therefore, to create an ethos of communication in the school that regards all teachers, all students, and other personnel as communicators. The school should provide an environment in which

- students are treated as communicators with a purpose

- talk is valued and respected

- students learn to talk because somebody initiates or provides an opportunity for communication

- adults talk 'with' and not 'at' the student

- feedback given to the student is positive and explicit

- interaction with others is enjoyable

- students begin to realise the value of talk, and the opportunities it provides in relation to communicating and understanding messages

- opportunities are created for all students regardless of abilities to contribute to talk and discussion

- the adult has a responsibility to pitch the interaction at an appropriate level.

Communication and oral language interaction

When planning for oral language in the curriculum, it is essential to ensure that the student will be provided with a variety of opportunities to use oral language in order to put meaning on experience. He/she should be involved in real talk in real contexts with a variety of partners. The routine of the school day provides many opportunities for engaging the student in language-rich social interactions. All those working within the school environment may be involved in the targeting of such opportunities for language teaching and learning.

In relation to the transfer of information from one teacher to another, the introduction of an agreed framework will be effective at class level, for example in end of year reports and individual progress reports.

Curriculum planning for literacy

Literacy must be seen in the context of oral language. An integrated approach will incorporate the development of oral language, reading, and writing skills. Skills instruction (sight vocabulary, phonics, structural analysis, letter formation, etc.) should be relevant to the students' general experiences of books and print.

The identification of an approach to the teaching of literacy and the selection of literacy materials for the student with mild general learning disabilities is a whole-school issue. Literacy is also a cross-curricular issue and decisions made regarding approaches to the teaching of literacy and the choice of literacy materials apply across the curriculum.

Establishing a culture of literacy within a school will involve the creation of an environment where

- being a reader and/or a writer is valued even at minimal levels (success at reading has to be a primary goal for this population)

- reading and writing are viewed as being purposeful and pleasurable experiences

- reading and writing are seen as empowering and enabling

- students will have many collaborative encounters with text

- opportunities are created to encourage all students, regardless of abilities to contribute

- all authors (including student authors) are valued and respected

- the school is proactive in involving parents/guardians in the literacy programme. (Parents/guardians may need to be given information in relation to choosing books and other reading materials that are appropriate to both the age and ability level of the student.)

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Choosing literacy materials

Choosing literacy materials for use within a school should take cognisance of the requirements of the whole school population. Materials used should

- **be appropriate**: They should encourage the development of the oral language abilities of the students.

- **be age-appropriate**: The materials should be of interest to the student, be of an appropriate reading level, and also assist in the development and extension of literacy skills.

- **be attractive, stimulating and enjoyable**: They should engage the students and capture their interest, so that they will want to continue using the materials and wish to return to them frequently.

- **be dynamic**: Printed signs in the school environment should reflect what is seen in the greater environment, for example 'please knock' instead of 'door'. The use of social sight vocabulary in a classroom setting will reinforce these messages.

- **be chosen for their suitability**: Presentation of text should be uncluttered and the print size used should be appropriate.

- **facilitate differentiation**: The student with minimal literacy skills should be enabled to participate by, for example, being encouraged to make inferences from pictorial images.

- **facilitate autonomy in the learner**: Illustrations used should be clear and unambiguous, for example in relation to the use of ICT software.

- **contain variety**: They should reflect the many functions for which reading and writing are used.

In general, the material should reflect themes that will be relevant to the student, that will assist in developing his/her literacy skills, and that may be linked to discussion and other oral language activities.

Organisational planning

In establishing an agreed structure for planning the oral language and the literacy curriculum, the following organisational issues arise:

- Time should be allocated at the start of each school year to identify the oral language and literacy learning needs of all students, to outline learning targets and to plan appropriate intervention strategies at school level. (See *Approaches and methodologies* section.)

- It may occasionally be necessary to address the particular achievements of, or problems experienced by, individual students at school level during the school year.

- The effectiveness of intervention strategies contained in the school's plan for oral language and literacy development should be evaluated at the end of each school year.

- The process of organising and planning for the development of oral language and literacy skills in the school is spiral in nature. It should be evaluated continually, so that future practice is informed by prior experience and reflects an assessment of the changing needs of the students.

- A good working knowledge of the oral language and literacy learning process on the part of all staff will determine the effectiveness of the planning process. At school level the responsibility for ensuring this may rest with the principal and/or with a designated teacher.

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Classroom planning

In accordance with the approach advocated in the *Primary School Curriculum*, classroom planning will address the four strands of the English curriculum.

However, oral language development has a particular relevance to students with mild general learning disabilities.

Classroom planning for communication and language

The planning of oral language experiences will not be confined to the communication and language curriculum, since oral language is not only a feature of learning in every curriculum area but a strategy that is central to the mediation of the curriculum. The development of reading and writing skills will then be built on this oral language base.

In planning for communication and language, a number of important considerations should be kept in mind:

- **The importance of the teacher's attitude to and use of language:** In his/her attitude to language and use of language the teacher can provide a crucial role model for students. The vocabulary, sentence structure, and register of language that the teacher uses should on the one hand be accessible to the student and on the other provide sufficient challenge to extend the student's awareness of the possibilities of language. It is important, too, that the teacher consistently models the full range of non-verbal cues, including tone of voice, facial expression, and gesture.

- **Dealing in a positive way with challenges:** The challenges a student faces in the area of language can provide a springboard for learning. The teacher can use them to diagnose the strengths and needs of students, and to identify strategies that will enhance their facility in using language.

- **Structuring the classroom environment:** The classroom environment should stimulate students' interest in language and encourage them to use it. The environment should include a variety of objects (familiar and unfamiliar), photographs, pictures, classroom displays, books, magazines, newspapers, labels, directions, and props for drama and role-playing. As added stimulation these elements should be changed regularly.

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■ **Rules of interaction need to be explored and taught in a variety of contexts:** Students with mild general learning disabilities may not readily appreciate the conventions of talk and discussion, for example listening, reacting to what they hear, tailoring their responses to what they hear in a group or one-to-one situation, or taking turns. Part of the teacher's concern will be to foster these skills in order to help students to take an effective part in interactive classroom situations, and to transfer these skills to everyday life.

Key considerations in planning for oral language development

When planning for oral language development, it will be helpful to consider the following points:

■ **Creating a communicative environment:** Students' talk should be valued, and the principle of 'talk for talk's sake' should be cultivated in the classroom (*Primary School Curriculum: English, Teacher Guidelines*, p.27). Students need to be aware that there are rules and conventions for interaction and to abide by them. It is important that communication should be 'real' and that talk takes place in real contexts encompassing students' interests and concerns, events in the home, the school and the wider world, and a variety of activities across the curriculum. Such communication can be structured and directed to encompass explicit instruction although, from the student's point of view, it may appear informal. Talk and communication should be attractive and enjoyable. It should contain elements such as fun, clowning, word games, riddles, deliberate errors, and action dialogue.

■ **Explicit instruction:** Students with mild general learning disabilities need explicit instruction if their potential for language is to be developed to the full. It is important that the teacher is aware of the language ability of individual students and that he/she uses this as a base from which to lead them to a greater facility with language. This will involve encouraging them to move from using language in real situations to using language in imaginary situations, and to make the progression from the concrete to the iconic and symbolic. A central element of such language activity will be encouraging students to engage consistently in analysing tasks to be done, to verbalise this process and discuss it with others, to ask and answer questions, and to justify particular choices and courses of action. In this way, both language development and cognitive development will be enhanced.

■ **The teacher as model:** The teacher should be continuously conscious of his/her potential as a model for language use. The language the teacher uses and the way he/she uses it can have a powerful influence on students' language development, their motivation to use language, and the development of their facility with language. To this end, it is important for the teacher to exploit the full range of the potential of language that is appropriate to the students, and to employ a variety of strategies that demonstrate the effectiveness and attractiveness of language. These will include

– the use of a challenging and appropriate range of vocabulary and syntax

– thinking out loud and working things out aloud

– verbalising different actions

– being involved in role-playing

– storytelling

– reading stories

– reflecting interest through animated verbal expression.

■ **A multi-sensory approach:** It is essential to provide the most effective stimulation in order to encourage language use. In the first place, the classroom environment should be colourful, lively and changing. In that context, every opportunity should be taken to evince sensory responses from students and to consistently encourage them to express these responses in language. It may often be necessary for the teacher to elicit and develop such responses through questioning, prompting, guiding, and even provoking the students. It is important, too, that the teacher should encourage the students to make the progression from mere reactionary responses to an expressive enunciation of likes and dislikes, approval and disapproval, enjoyment and celebration. It should be a feature of classroom life that students are encouraged to understand and clarify their thoughts and emotions through the use of language. The strands of the English curriculum, *Developing cognitive abilities through language* and *Emotional and imaginative development through language* provide detailed guidance on these aspects of language use.

■ **Role-playing:** Role-playing provides considerable opportunities for language use and language development. It can involve the student in an interactive way in both a listening and a responding mode. Because role-playing provides a structured situation in which each student who participates has a well-defined role and function, a context is created that supports and encourages students in using language. It should be stressed, however, that some students may experience difficulties in bridging the gap from the real world to the imaginary world of role-playing. The guidelines on drama for the teacher of students with mild general learning disabilities offer useful advice in dealing with this issue.

■ **Language and learning:** Language activity is a central part of learning in every area of the curriculum. Therefore, one of the most important contexts for language development is the learning process itself. Although the integrity of learning intrinsic to any subject must be respected, the teacher needs to be aware of the possibilities for language development that the learning process consistently presents. Most importantly, students' experiences in the different curriculum areas provide real and varied contexts in which the teacher can, through questioning, prompting, guidance, and discussion, encourage the student to become fully involved in a process of language activity in which effective learning takes place. Ideally, there should be a symbiotic relationship between learning in history, for example, and the language activity that provides so much of the context for the learning. In using language to develop new concepts, to acquire new knowledge, to question, and to clarify their ideas students are encouraged to use language to learn while at the same time their language development is enhanced.

■ **Developing self-confidence and self-esteem:** The more successful students are in language learning, as in all learning, the more confidence they will have in becoming involved in the learning process. This not only gives the student an incentive to learn but makes it more likely that he/she will learn more effectively. It is important, therefore, to recognise, acknowledge, and reward the real achievements of students, even though these may often be quite small. It is equally important that the currency of recognition and reward is not diluted by indiscriminate praise.

Classroom planning for literacy development

The development of the literacy skills of students with mild general learning disabilities will, as with all students, be based on their oral language experience. The following should be given careful consideration:

- Literacy activities should be rooted in the students' own experiences.

- A student's oral language development and experience will define starting points for the development of literacy skills.

- The level of development of fine motor skills will have a crucial bearing on students' progress in literacy.

- Although the development of oral competence is paramount, students should experience literacy activities from the earliest stages. They should be encouraged to handle books from the beginning and see themselves as readers. The class library should contain a variety of books that includes picture books, books with one-word captions or sentence captions, and books with illustration and text.

- Teachers should prioritise carefully the sequence of oral and literacy activities that are most appropriate to individual students, so that students achieve the maximum level of success at all stages.

- Literacy activities should be enjoyable for students.

- Literacy activities should contain options for the student who is unable to read/write.

- Explicit instruction needs to be provided in the 'language of literacy'.

- Parents/guardians should be kept fully informed and involved at every stage of the student's literacy development.

- As well as challenging students, it is important that they are given the opportunity to use a variety of reading materials of the same level of difficulty, to enable them to reinforce the literacy skills they have mastered and to experience consistent success in the reading process.

Choosing books

One of the most important factors in enabling students to develop literacy skills and an interest in reading is the extent to which they are read to, both at home and in school. The school should encourage parents/guardians to read to their children on a daily basis. In school, hearing books and other texts read to them should be a central element of students' experience. The presence of books should be a feature of the home and the classroom. The class library or library corner should contain a wide range of age-appropriate books that cater for a variety of levels of development. The value of access to books as an aid to motivation cannot be over-estimated.

Books should

- have strong central characters and a strong theme

- encapsulate an element of predictability in language, in which repetition is an enhancing rather than a boring feature

- attract, intrigue, and illuminate

- have natural language, engaging narrative, and an uncontrived and natural text

- be flexible enough to allow the teacher to create a simple text version or to add text to a picture book.

Whatever text is chosen, and whether children read it themselves or whether it is read to them, talk and discussion about the text should be central to the reading experience.

Choosing texts for teaching reading

Texts are chosen to enable students to learn to read or to read to learn. In either case, reading for meaning and the development of comprehension skills is of crucial importance. Depending on its purpose, a text should differ in terms of the number of new words met by the student reader. For example, a student involved in a 'reading to learn' task should not encounter more than two unknown words in every hundred.

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Choosing commercially available materials

It is important to choose material that is appropriate to the age and ability of the student with mild general learning disabilities.

When choosing support materials it is important to ensure that they

- provide meaningful contexts

- offer opportunities to address more than one example of the targeted skill

- are uncluttered in format, and clearly target relevant skills

- are clearly directed at the current literacy task.

The teacher as author

In the early stages of learning to read the text chosen should provide positive reading experiences. In many cases this may require the teacher to create personalised texts for the students. For example, classmates' names can provide a valuable stimulus to read that is particularly relevant to these students. The focus can shift later to a wider and more flexible vocabulary. Personalised texts are of enormous benefit in that they are based on the individual student's oral language vocabulary and experience.

In choosing vocabulary for texts it is important to prioritise:

- vocabulary that is most likely to enable students to achieve some independence in reading at a basic level

- high frequency words

- the smaller link words

- words directly connected to the student's personal experience

- common social sight vocabulary.

Repetition will be an important feature of the text in that it will enable the student to learn to use the predictability of oral language as a key strategy in learning to read. It is essential, however, to ensure that the repetition occurs in a natural and meaningful context.

When constructing text the teacher should take into account the criteria normally used in constructing text for an emergent reader. These include:

- a relevant level of interest

- age-appropriateness

- appropriate structure and pace

- the use of high frequency words.

Using these criteria and knowledge of the student's developmental stage, the teacher as author can personalise texts and make them functional and pertinent to the everyday needs of individual students with mild general learning disabilities. Personalised texts are valuable not only in the early stages of a student's reading career but right throughout the period of instruction leading to the student becoming an independent reader.

Progress is monitored through the use of standardised tests, by reference to high frequency word lists, and by keeping up-to-date word banks for individual students. In a mainstream classroom the use of personalised texts, in addition to the use of commercially produced materials, can be used successfully with all students. It is important, however, that the class teacher and resource teacher plan carefully for this approach, in order to eliminate the danger of isolating the student with mild general learning disabilities from peers during the literacy lesson.

Using personalised texts can provide students with access to a reading experience that links what they read to both their oral vocabulary and language learning and to their direct experience of the world. Their response to such texts provides the teacher with invaluable feedback on their level of understanding and skill in the many facets of literacy development and allows him/her to continually fine-tune the teaching and learning process.

This approach, taking account of a wider range of reading materials, is developed in more detail in *A responsive framework for teaching literacy skills* in the *Approaches and methodologies* section.

Other considerations

The following are some other considerations that need to be taken into account when planning the approach to reading:

- **Personnel:** Reading time with adults, parents/guardians, special needs assistants, siblings, etc. should be planned when developing a programme of reading for students with mild general learning disabilities. Peer tutoring, and adapted programmes such as C.A.P.E.R. (Children And Parents Reading Together) should also be considered.

- **The class library:** The class library or library corner, as has been outlined already, should contain a wide range of suitable age-appropriate texts. The text can, in some cases, be recorded by the teacher and played as the student reads the text. Recorded stories should include such cues as *'turn to the next page'*. Students can also record their own 'reading aloud' for classmates and for assessment purposes.

- **Environmental print:** Social sight vocabulary is of particular importance to most students with mild general learning disabilities and this should be a feature of both the classroom and the school. Sentences highlighting daily routines, greetings used for visitors, birthday messages, etc. should also be displayed. The whole school community should be alert to the significance of this.

- **Access to resources:** It is important that teachers are kept aware of newly published literature, teacher resource literature, and the availability of courses and training.

Classroom planning for writing

Writing involves communicating in a symbolic form just as reading involves receiving a communication in a symbolic form. Understanding symbols can be difficult for students with mild general learning disabilities. In planning the approach to the process of writing it is important to keep the following considerations in mind:

- The teacher should be careful in using language for instruction. For example, the instruction *'draw a line down'* may need explanation in the context of working on a horizontal surface.

- The student needs support in the early stages. Attention should be given to issues such as allowing enough time for a task, for example, the correct way of holding a writing implement, the position of the copy, or copying from the blackboard.

- Careful assessment will enable the teacher to decide on the capabilities of each student and to plan individual approaches.

- Decisions on the use of ICT only in the writing process should involve the student and their parents/guardians.

- If homework is to be written down, the extra time needed by individual students should be considered.

- To take account of students' confidence and self-esteem, attention needs to be given to the time individual students need to perform different writing exercises.

- The teacher needs to be aware of the level of oral language skills and the level of writing skills a student brings to a writing task, and he/she needs to take into account the range of language registers the students can use.

- The role of the teacher in modelling the writing process is crucial to students' development as writers.

- In encouraging students to become independent writers, it is important that they are aware of the purposes of writing. Students with mild general learning disabilities may not always see writing as having a function in their lives.

- A valuable exercise in helping students to appreciate the importance of the structure and continuity of text is to encourage them to organise and reassemble a familiar text that has been cut into a number of sections.

- Print in the environment should be similar in font design to that encountered in students' reading materials.

- All personnel involved with students should agree a policy in relation to features of writing such as size and scale, spacing, and the use of upper and lower case letters.

Assessment

The curriculum for English in the *Primary School Curriculum* outlines the approach to assessment in this area. However, in assessing students with mild general learning disabilities the following additional considerations should be kept in mind:

■ **The normal sequence of oral language development:** The normal sequence of language acquisition and expectations of achievement at different stages will provide a base from which to measure the extent to which students with mild general learning disabilities experience difficulties or delay in language development.

■ **Knowledge of the individual student's communication and language skills:** The level of the student's maturity, personal, social, and cultural experiences, individual communicative style, and social development will all be factors in assessing a student's progress and attainment in language.

■ **A variety of sources of information on students:** A variety of personnel will contribute to the assessment of the student. Information gleaned from parents/guardians, other teachers, other classroom personnel, therapists, psychologists, and other professionals will be essential in constructing a profile of the individual student's progress and attainment in language.

■ **Diagnosing individual difficulties:** Effective assessment is the basis for developing an individual learning plan. It is important that each student's particular learning needs are identified. Along with other assessment procedures, diagnostic assessment will have an important role in the assessment process.

■ **Involving parents/guardians in the assessment process:** It is important that parents/guardians are fully involved in the assessment process. Parental input is essential in assessing students' language development effectively, and the information gleaned from assessment will be crucial in enabling parents/guardians to complement and support the student's learning in school.

■ **Taking account of sensory and other difficulties:** It is important that hearing or visual impairments or other physical disabilities are taken into account in the assessment process.

■ **Assessment and individual educational plans:** Assessment has a central contribution to make in developing an individual educational plan for a student. It can help to indicate particular areas of difficulty and define immediate learning goals, and, in evaluating progress, contribute to the redefinition of those goals.

■ **The importance of recording teacher observations:** In order to maximise the effectiveness of the cyclical process of assessment, teaching, and learning, it is important that the teacher keeps a consistent but manageable record of his/her observations of students in the course of the learning process.

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Approaches and methodologies

In order to work effectively with students with mild general learning disabilities, the teacher needs a comprehensive picture of the challenges they experience in learning language and in learning through language.

These challenges are different for every student. Students will differ both in the range of the challenges they experience and in the extent to which these challenges impact on their learning.

In supporting these students, therefore, the teacher will be required to respond appropriately to their individual language learning needs regardless of whether the student is in a special school, a special class, or in a mainstream class.

The approaches and methodologies are laid out in the form of two responsive frameworks relating to language learning needs:

- a responsive framework for meeting individual oral language learning needs
- a responsive framework for teaching literacy skills.

These frameworks will enable the teacher to construct a profile of the individual learner in both the oral and literacy domains, and will provide suggested teacher responses to individual needs. The profiles constructed will inform the planning of both short and long term goals for the student.

Table 1 provides a template for constructing a language profile for a student with mild general learning disabilities, using the terminology outlined below in relation to the strands of the English curriculum.

Table 2 is an example of how this template can be used to construct an oral language profile of a particular student.

The template can be used to record observations of the student with mild learning disabilities in a variety of contexts over a number of weeks. All those working with the student should be involved in contributing to the development of an oral language profile of a student. When the profile is complete it will show at a glance the learning needs of the student. The template may be adapted to suit the needs of particular schools.

The template can also be used to construct a literacy profile of a student and provides the basis for a responsive framework for teaching literacy skills.

A responsive framework for meeting individual oral language learning needs

Since the purpose of these guidelines is to facilitate the teacher in mediating the primary school curriculum for students with mild general learning disabilities, suggested strategies for addressing possible areas of difficulty in relation to the area of oral language for these students have been related directly to the four strands of the English language curriculum:

■ Receptiveness to language

■ Competence and confidence in using language

■ Developing cognitive abilities through language

■ Emotional and imaginative development through language.

The strands reflect the principle that language is learned in a holistic way. However, in order to facilitate the teacher in constructing a language profile for the individual student, and in suggesting strategies to address potential difficulties the student may have, a number of sub-headings related to the strands are used. These refer to

■ the potential areas of difficulty a student may have

■ a description of these difficulties in more detailed terms under four headings:

– communication

– form

– semantics

– use.

Communication: engaging with social and linguistic rules

Communication relates to knowledge of and competence in engaging with social and linguistic rules. It is concerned with the ability to interact, to understand, and to communicate appropriately (both verbally and non-verbally) in different situations.

Form: how words are put together

Form relates to how the phonemes, morphemes, and syllables are put together to form words. It is also concerned with grammar, syntax, and word order. Intonation and stress are other aspects of oral language form.

Semantics: what we talk about

Semantics relates to the content of talk and to the meanings conveyed in words, phrases, and sentences.

Use: using talk as a tool

Use relates to the way in which we use form and semantics appropriately to fulfil different functions in a variety of contexts. It is concerned with how we apply oral language as a tool for structuring thinking and achieving goals with words.

In using the responsive framework the teacher needs an appreciation of the interactive nature of language learning and a clear understanding of the roles played by both teacher and student in communication. The teacher uses this knowledge to make effective choices regarding strategies for teaching oral language to students with mild general learning disabilities.

This terminology is not used specifically in the *Primary School Curriculum*. However, it may be of use to teachers in

■ talking about and planning a whole-school approach to oral language development

■ working with speech and language therapists

■ interpreting tests

■ developing both formal and informal assessment procedures for the purpose of constructing individual profiles.

It should be stressed, however, that while these sub-headings (*communication*, *form*, *semantics*, and *use*) are useful for the reasons described above, they cannot be divorced from one another. They will be employed simultaneously when a student is engaged in meaningful linguistic interaction with others.

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TABLE 1

A template for constructing a language profile for a student with mild general learning disabilities

Receptiveness to language	Competence and confidence in using language	Developing cognitive abilities through language	Developing emotional and imaginative abilities through language
General:	General:	General:	General:
Communication:	Communication:	Communication:	Communication:
Form:	Form:	Form:	Form:
Semantics:	Semantics:	Semantics:	Semantics:
Use:	Use:	Use:	Use:

TABLE 2

A sample oral language profile of a student with mild general learning disabilities

Receptiveness to language	Competence and confidence in using language	Developing cognitive abilities through language	Developing emotional and imaginative abilities through language
General: Has poor listening and attention skills.	**General:** Experiences overall shyness, leading to reluctance to talk in social situations.	**General:** Has recall and retrieval difficulties and may focus on irrelevant visual or aural elements.	**General:** Uses stock phrases. Has limited play skills.
Communication: Misses out on social signals.	**Communication:** Has difficulty in keeping on topic and has poor initiation skills.	**Communication:** Omits essential information and has sequential difficulties.	**Communication:** Fails to use the full range of non-verbal cues.
Form: Often hooks onto one word. Hears minimal differences but confuses meaning.	**Form:** Hesitates, and overuses repetition of words/sentences/questions.	**Form:** Fails to recognise minimal changes. Has difficulties with forms such as 'sister's friend's dress'.	**Form:** Lacks colour.
Semantics: Has some difficulty in transferring meaning to another setting.	**Semantics:** Talks about some topics. Shows minimal responses with little elaboration and relies too much on 'here and now' vocabulary.	**Semantics:** Has difficulty sequencing events when verbalising.	**Semantics:** Guesses meaning.
Use: 'Clams up' in social situations.	**Use:** Lacks confidence and has difficulty in initiating conversation.	**Use:** Will generally 'do' rather than 'say', i.e. categorising in concrete fashion rather than verbally. Frequently asks questions for which the answer is already known.	**Use:**

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A responsive framework for oral language development

Strand
Receptiveness to language

⚠ **Potential area of difficulty**	+ **Possible strategies**
General: *The student may have difficulty* ▪ in understanding oral language ▪ with short and/or long term memory problems including poor memory for words	**General:** *The teacher should ensure that* ▪ the student is provided with frequent opportunities to return to new concepts and contexts ▪ the spoken word is enhanced and supported by the use of gesture, facial expression, and concrete materials in order to ensure comprehension ▪ learning is supported by making links to the real world using pictorial and symbolic representations.
▪ in developing receptive skills: it may be necessary to maintain a focus on the development of these skills throughout all classes	▪ The acquisition of meaning may be supported by targeting all the student's channels of perception: visual, aural, tactile, olfactory and kinesthetic, continuing this throughout the school years using age-appropriate materials and methodologies. ▪ contexts are created for language learning involving frequent repetition, for example, – opportunities which may present themselves in the structure of the school day and the use of repetitive language in story, song, games, and action dialogues.
▪ with hearing problems, for example – when general instruction is given the student may copy others – the student will often be the last to react or appears oblivious to teacher instruction – the student may request repetition and says *'What?'* frequently – the pitch of the voice used by the student may be too low or too loud ▪ with poor listening and attention skills.	▪ he/she is aware of the miscues or behaviour exhibited by the student that may indicate the existence of a hearing loss ▪ the student is sitting close to and facing him/her, and that note is taken of the reactions or otherwise of the student ▪ potential distractions are concealed or removed and the student is attending ▪ explicit instruction for listening in relation to posture and focus is given where necessary.

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Strand
Receptiveness to language

⚠ **Potential area of difficulty**	+ **Possible strategies**

Communication:
The student may have difficulty
■ interpreting facial expressions, gestures, posture, and tone of voice
■ conforming to and interpreting the social rules of conversation, for example using appropriate language in different situations.
	Communication:
	The teacher should ensure that
	■ he/she includes opportunities for interpreting gestures through the use of role-playing, drama, stories, songs, games, and daily routines
	■ his/her own social signals are very explicit:
	  – exaggerating role-playing with inappropriate reactions, and encouraging students to identify what is wrong with such reactions
	  – drawing attention to what is inappropriate if the student has not identified it.

Form:
The student may have difficulty
■ understanding more than basic grammatical structures (syntax), for example:
  – he/she may not understand the central message
  – he/she may only tune into the end of the sentence
  – he/she may focus on a word rather than on the totality of what has been said, and may not, therefore, comprehend the message being conveyed
 	
■ in relation to words that sound very similar, for example, tongue and thumb
■ understanding the language of storybooks or textbooks.
	Form:
	The teacher should ensure that
	■ the student is focused on the task in hand and is aware that instructions are being given or that questions are being asked
	■ the complexity of instructions and questions is appropriate to the level of the student's comprehension
	■ gesture, tone of voice, and pictures or symbols are used where appropriate, in order to enable the student to comprehend
	■ the student is asked to relate back to the teacher instructions given, in order to establish that these instructions have been understood and the specific task involved may be completed satisfactorily
	
	■ where necessary, specific objects are indicated and pictures and symbols are used in order to assist the student
	■ the text has been prepared in advance in order to select appropriate areas of differentiation, for example paraphrasing pieces of texts.

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Strand
Receptiveness to language

⚠ **Potential area of difficulty**	➕ **Possible strategies**
Semantics: *The student may have difficulty*	**Semantics:** *The teacher should ensure that*
▪ applying the meaning of the vocabulary used in one context to another setting	▪ in general, before the introduction of new material, relevant vocabulary is revised so as to enable the student to transfer meaning from one context to the new context
▪ following a sequence of ideas or instructions	▪ explicit teaching on the language of sequence is included, for example – *first, then, next, finally* ▪ encouraging the student to recall and describe a task or an activity previously undertaken where necessary, support materials are used, for example pictures relating to the sequence in which a task is usually executed, and withdrawing these supports as appropriate ▪ there is a focus on explicit training in auditory sequential memory for the student where this is necessary
▪ identifying and interpreting inferred meaning	▪ the attention of the student is drawn to relevant prior experience ▪ where appropriate, the student voices thought processes aloud, for example *'If I heard someone saying X, I would know that …'*
▪ identifying and comprehending abstract meaning.	▪ he/she begins from the comprehension level of the student and makes connections between the new concepts and familiar concepts, providing appropriate concrete support materials in order to convey the particular concept
▪ in relation to metaphorical references, where these are interpreted literally, for example *'Pull up your socks'* or *'Don't let the cat out of the bag'*.	▪ metaphorical references used are explained for the student, teaching the more common metaphors where appropriate, and encouraging the student to suggest some that he/she may have heard, for example: *A whole-class activity, based on a television programme, can be carried out with students working in teams, suggesting, interpreting, and identifying metaphors or catchphrases and subsequently explaining their meanings.*

Strand
Receptiveness to language

⚠ **Potential area of difficulty**	+ **Possible strategies**

Semantics (continued):
The student may have difficulty
■ interpreting words, for example, such as *light, right, book, place*, that have different meanings in different contexts.
	Semantics (continued):
	The teacher should ensure that
	■ vocabulary used is chosen carefully ensuring that messages given by the teacher are clear and unambiguous, and providing clarification when necessary
	■ words that may be misinterpreted are explained in relevant contexts, for example,
	  – light (opposite of heavy and opposite of dark)
	  – place (a particular spot in class or *'place a container in the sink'*).

Use: *The student may have difficulty* ■ using appropriate language for the variety of social situations.	**Use:** *The teacher should ensure that* ■ a variety of methods are employed in order to reflect real life situations that may be encountered by the student, and that appropriate responses are identified through, for example, – role-playing, direct instruction, and the teacher modelling appropriate and inappropriate reactions and responses ■ opportunities are identified for students to interact with adults in the school community, using appropriate language registers.

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Strand	
Competence and confidence in using language	
⚠ **Potential area of difficulty**	**+ Possible strategies**
General: *The student may have difficulty* ▪ vocalising thoughts or needs adequately ▪ contributing orally, despite possessing a good degree of receptive language skills. *The student may* ▪ imitate responses given by others ▪ rely on others to respond on his/her behalf. *The student may have difficulty* ▪ when asked to explain why a particular response was given, or may presume that the response was incorrect.	**General:** *The teacher should ensure that* ▪ the student is assisted in conveying messages and clarifying thoughts by the use of focused questions such as, *'Do you mean …?'* ▪ all relevant reports on the student's level of skills development are available to ensure an accurate understanding of his/her capabilities in relation to comprehension and the identification of other media through which the student may communicate effectively, for example through the use of pictures, visual arts and ICT ▪ learning contexts are structured to ensure that the student is involved as an individual, and is encouraged to contribute in an atmosphere that welcomes the contributions of all students ▪ the student is confident that asking further questions does not necessarily mean that he/she has made an error.

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Strand
Competence and confidence in using language

⚠ **Potential area of difficulty**	✛ **Possible strategies**
Communication: *The student may have difficulty* ▪ comprehending and acquiring turn-taking skills with a partner or others. *The student may have* ▪ poor initiation skills and often 'enters' conversations inappropriately.	**Communication:** *The teacher should ensure that* ▪ an atmosphere is created in the classroom in which students are required to listen when others are speaking, using a variety of strategies, for example – involving the student in oral language games and activities which require participants to contribute in sequence – giving an object to a student (a smooth stone or a soft ball) who may open a conversation or discussion on a topic, and then pass the object to others, contributing only when he/she is holding the object (some songs, chants and rhymes are very suitable in this regard due to question and response styles) ▪ appropriate behaviour is highlighted and rewarded, using role-playing of situations that involve the student in the identification of appropriate and inappropriate contributions
The student may have difficulty ▪ keeping to the point	▪ once the student understands the context of the discussion, the main focus of the discussion is recalled when necessary
▪ maintaining eye-contact	▪ the student is aware of the importance of making eye-contact when talking to someone, and that this is demonstrated to the student ▪ a pattern is established whereby a conversation is only initiated when eye-contact is achieved (at a very basic level making eye-contact can constitute that it is someone's 'turn')
▪ realising when the use of familiar greetings is inappropriate	▪ the student is given many opportunities to rehearse appropriate behaviour for the variety of settings a student may experience, for example: – using role-playing and drama to practise greetings, and initiating and closing conversations (at home, in school, in shops, when meeting visitors)
▪ adapting language and behaviour to different social settings.	– taking opportunities to practise these in real settings, for example when the Principal or other visitor enters the classroom, or when visiting a local shop or the library.

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Strand	
Competence and confidence in using language	
⚠ **Potential area of difficulty**	+ **Possible strategies**
Form: *The student may have difficulty*	**Form:** *The teacher should ensure that*
■ in the articulation of words, a difficulty that may, in some instances, be serious and persistent	■ any reports relevant to the presence of this difficulty are to hand, and that guidelines given by specialists in the area are followed
■ developing fluency; because of a stammer or hesitation through lack of confidence	■ time is allowed for the student to finish his/her input, and others are encouraged to do likewise
■ identifying appropriate words for communicating a particular message	■ enjoyable opportunities are given for a student to contribute without stammer or hesitancy, for example singing or reciting songs involving turn-taking that may give opportunities to experience a sense of success in addition to the accompanying enjoyment factor
	■ prompts are supplied and gestures are used to encourage a student who has difficulty finding the correct word to convey meaning, and that he/she waits for the student's contribution with positive expectancy
■ acquiring the conventions of grammar.	■ he/she is aware of the sequence of normal grammar acquisition in order to ensure that challenges for the student are developmentally appropriate
	■ he/she modifies his/her own use of language structure in order to ensure that the student has a clear understanding of what is being said.

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Strand
Competence and confidence in using language

⚠ Potential area of difficulty	+ Possible strategies
Semantics:	**Semantics:**
The student may have difficulty	*The teacher should ensure that*
▪ dealing with a variety of topics and may tend to talk about the same topic repeatedly	▪ the student is aware of the effect of repetitive talk on the listener and that he/she is assisted in extending and developing his/her interests in relevant ways
▪ maintaining a focus on the topic under discussion	▪ the student is reminded of the topic under discussion and is encouraged to elaborate by interjections with cues such as, *'And?'* or *'What happened next?'*
▪ developing vocabulary beyond the strongly concrete 'here and now'.	▪ he/she begins from the student's present ability level and builds on existing vocabulary through involving concrete and real experiences both inside and outside the classroom by – personalising the experience – using photographs, slides, etc. to revisit those experiences – using the language and vivid texts of story to 'back-up' experiences and connect the real life experience of students with the world of the imagination.

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Strand
Competence and confidence in using language

⚠ **Potential area of difficulty**	✚ **Possible strategies**
Use: *The student may have difficulty* ▪ adapting greetings used in a family setting for use in other social settings	**Use:** *The teacher should ensure that* ▪ the student is involved in talk and discussion in relation to greetings and the variety of social settings, as previously mentioned ▪ the student is given opportunities to practise the use of these in a variety of 'real' contexts, as suggested previously ▪ opportunities are given to the student to interact with personnel within the school and visitors to the school, in order to reinforce the settings rehearsed during role-playing and drama activities

▪ offering responses requiring criticism and creativity.	▪ the student is viewed as a thinker and is expected to contribute
	 ▪ the student understands that an 'open question' invites an opinion by modelling activities such as
	   – thinking aloud, emphasising *'maybe …'* and using simple structures when the student is familiar with the context
	   – talking about what he/she likes and inviting the student to do likewise. (It is important that any response given by the student is welcomed. The teacher should show an interest in the opinions of the student, since this will encourage participation in similar exercises in the future, in a 'safe' environment where all opinions are valued.)

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Strand
Developing cognitive abilities through language

⚠ **Potential area of difficulty**	+ **Possible strategies**
General: *The student may have difficulty*	**General:** *The teacher should ensure that*
■ making connections between what is already known ■ using what is already known in new and unfamiliar contexts ■ relating new information to personal experience	■ when introducing new information explicit reference is made to what the student already knows, particularly through the use of integrated themes that link the new information to what has been encountered already and recycle previous learned material, for example, water - – SESE: science – the properties of water – SPHE: hygiene and environmental awareness – English: talk and discussion about water and poetry and story with water a theme – music: listening to music with a water theme
■ relating to the recalling and retrieval of information	■ recall strategies are taught
■ retaining two or more pieces of relevant information/concepts in relation to problem solving, for example: given three objects, *a, b* and *c*, of different sizes and being asked to say which one is bigger than *a* and smaller than *c*	■ that each individual concept, for example 'bigger than' and 'smaller than' is understood.
■ with abstract reasoning	■ he/she moves from the concrete to the abstract, in particular using concrete support materials to introduce new concepts and continuing to use them as the abilities and progress of individual students require
■ maintaining concentration, may be easily distracted, and may focus on irrelevant elements of visual or aural content	■ any unnecessary distractions are removed when presenting the student with a task, that the language of instruction is clear and the materials used are relevant to the task in hand
■ looking beyond a particular feature of a situation, and scanning in order to get an overview of the situation.	■ he/she enables the student to get an overview of a topic by asking questions that direct the student's attention to particular aspects of the topic, that challenge the student to retain more than one central point, and that encourage the student to participate actively and with confidence.

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Strand
Developing cognitive abilities through language

⚠ **Potential area of difficulty**	+ **Possible strategies**
General (continued): *The student may have difficulty* ■ expressing personal experiences through oral language, with the result that perceptions are not consolidated or challenged	**General** (continued): *The teacher should ensure that* ■ the student is given opportunities to speak of experiences and personal perspectives in order to enable him/her to clarify and give expression to these experiences (using concrete materials such as photographs, pictures, or other relevant objects as supports)
■ with recall skills	■ students are encouraged to recall and relate previous experiences regularly using a variety of appropriate games to assist in the development of memory skills, for example – asking the student to retell a story – involving the student in games such as '*I went to the shop and I bought …*' – asking the student to say what he/she saw on the way to/from school
■ with discernment, may believe what is heard without question due to a lack of confidence in his/her own judgement, or may not fully understand the difference between fact and fiction.	■ students are encouraged to challenge what they hear when engaging with stories/pieces of fiction, by inviting them to speak of the likelihood of such events occurring in real life (reality versus fantasy), for example *Jack and the Beanstalk*. (The teacher may also need to make deliberate and exaggerated errors in relation to such pieces of text in order to encourage students to challenge the 'judgement'.)

Strand	
Developing cognitive abilities through language	
⚠ **Potential area of difficulty**	+ **Possible strategies**
Communication: *The student may have difficulty* ■ communicating all the relevant information/facts to another ■ relating information in a sequential fashion, and may communicate pieces of information in a random way.	**Communication:** *The teacher should ensure that* ■ information that has been omitted by the student is identified and that the student understands why this information is important ■ the student is enabled to sequence thoughts before communicating. (Teaching cue words such as 'first', 'next', 'then', 'finally' or 'last' will assist the student in presenting his/her information in a logical manner.)
Form: *The student may have difficulty* ■ understanding material presented in complex grammatical structures, for example his *'brother's friend's dog'* ■ perceiving changes of meaning when words looks very similar, for example small, smaller and smallest when dealing with mathematical language.	**Form:** *The teacher should ensure that* ■ where appropriate, sentences are simplified in order to ensure that the student understands the message being conveyed ■ relative terms to be used have been considered prior to the lesson, for example *comparing and contrasting items in a classroom* *big, bigger, biggest* *long, longer, longest* *loud, louder, loudest.*

Semantics:
The student may have difficulty
■ verbalising a process or a sequence of events
 	
■ using words such as big, tall, long, and wide in the correct context
 	
■ comprehending puns, and words or sentences with double meanings.
	Semantics:
	The teacher should ensure that
	■ a pattern is established whereby students are encouraged to explain steps taken in completing a task or the sequence of a story, for example
	  – giving an account of how a seed was planted—first, next, then, etc.
	  – explaining how a sandwich is made
	  – preparing for a visual arts activity by making a list of what will be needed
	■ he/she is aware of the student's tendency to over-generalise, for example using *big* for long, tall, wide, etc., and isolate features that are under discussion before the student is given descriptive vocabulary
	■ these words and phrases are excluded from teaching vocabulary when addressing students with these difficulties.

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Strand
Developing cognitive abilities through language

⚠ **Potential area of difficulty**	+ **Possible strategies**
Use: *The student may have difficulty* ■ using the language of reasoning, explaining, cause and effect, and conjecture	**Use:** *The teacher should ensure that* ■ a variety of question types are practised and the language for responding to these questions is supplied, for example *'Why?' 'Because …', 'What if?' 'Maybe …', 'How?'*, etc., giving examples of possible answers to such questions and challenging students to accept or reject them as possible responses, while bearing in mind that, whereas many children may be capable of making inferences from what is said, this may not be the case for the student with mild general learning disabilities
■ using the vocabulary relating to classification and categorisation	■ teaching initially involves the use of concrete objects and then progresses to the pictorial level, gradually withdrawing the supports as the progress and ability of the student require ■ classifying and sorting tasks are refined according to the ability of the student, for example, *initially classifying of animals as those that may be kept as pets versus those seen in the zoo, and later as tame versus wild or even herbivores versus carnivores.* (The level of sophistication of the challenge should ensure that the student enjoys the task and approaches it with a sense of confidence rather than with a feeling of apprehension.)
■ asking questions for which he/she does not know the answer, rather than questions for which he/she already knows the answer.	■ students understand the functions of questions, for example – When the student already knows the answer, there is no need to ask the question. – Questions are asked for a variety of reasons. – The student should ask a question to get information. – The teacher asks questions in order to establish what the student knows or if the student has understood a concept or instruction.

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Strand
Developing cognitive abilities through language

⚠ **Potential area of difficulty**	+ **Possible strategies**
Use (continued): *The student may have difficulty* ■ clarifying what information is needed in relation to a given task or activity when asking questions ■ becoming involved in situations where responses requiring criticism and creativity are necessary.	**Use** (continued): *The teacher should ensure that* ■ contexts are created whereby the student is required to assess what is known and what is not known, for example – activities that require a student to identify what is missing – working in pairs (or two groups of two) in which one person (or pair) has information and the other person (or pair) needs this information in order to complete a task, for example drawing a picture and asking precise questions in order to get the correct reply: *'Where is the mug?' 'It is on the table.'* *'Where is the dog?' 'He is behind the television'*, etc. – playing 'Twenty questions' which requires students to reflect on what is known, and to compose questions to gather further information ■ a safe atmosphere is created in which real critical/ creative responses are welcomed through – the use of cue questions to support the student in justifying personal preferences – the teacher may model his/her own thinking aloud and encouraging students to do the same – encouraging students to give reasons for responses – providing a formula for the student if necessary, for example *'I think … because ….'* – valuing all inputs in relation to comments or (constructive) criticism.

Strand
Emotional and imaginative development

⚠ **Potential area of difficulty**	+ **Possible strategies**
General: *The student may have difficulty* ■ finding words to express his/her own feelings, and this may have implications for the development of self-confidence and self-expression ■ using prior knowledge and experience to create imaginative contexts	**General:** *The teacher should ensure that* ■ the student is given the vocabulary necessary to express his/her feelings ■ the student is made aware of verbal and non-verbal ways of expressing and interpreting feelings through – using story to introduce abstract vocabulary in relation to personal feelings encouraging students to contribute to discussion, thus creating opportunities for the student to relate his/her own personal experiences directly to the story – engaging the student in a conversation in which the student and teacher together create an imaginative scene – encouraging the student to recall personal experiences, the experiences of others, and stories he/she has already heard or read – asking key questions to assist students in improving and developing this skill
■ in participating and contributing to discussion in the belief that there is only one correct answer, and may not comprehend open-ended tasks or activities	■ the student receives positive feedback when contributing to discussion, is reassured that making mistakes is tolerated, and is introduced to scenarios where there are a number of possibilities for proceeding, for example: *Mark cycled to the shop when his mother had told him not to. He left his bicycle outside the shop when he went in to buy a packet of crisps. What do you think happened next?*
■ engaging in play activities because of limited skills relating to play.	■ the appropriate vocabulary necessary for describing play is supplied and the student is asked questions in order to encourage him/her to verbalise what is being done (using this vocabulary) ■ the student is encouraged to participate with a partner or within small groups and discuss play activities.

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Strand	
Emotional and imaginative development	
⚠ **Potential area of difficulty**	**+ Possible strategies**
General (continued): *The student may have difficulty* ■ realising that there may be an alternative solution to a problem.	**General** (continued): *The teacher should ensure that* ■ he/she includes a variety of problems, some of which have a single solution and some with more than one possible solution, and encourages the students to look for and discuss more than one solution, for example: *Marian would like a particular game for her birthday. Her Dad says that it is too expensive. What could Marian do? (Save up her pocket money to put towards the game, offer to do extra chores around the house, etc.)*
Communication: *The student may have difficulty* ■ in relation to receptiveness to language in real situations, for example, interpreting expressions of moods and tones of voice in others, with consequent difficulties arising in communicating similar moods and tones in imaginative situations.	**Communication:** *The teacher should ensure that* ■ opportunities are created to discuss expressions of emotions, including how they may be physically expressed, for example: – The teacher may initiate talk and discussion about expressions of emotions, drawing attention to the physical aspect, where necessary modelling these or asking other students to mime being very happy, sad, worried, angry, etc. – 'Mirror' games can be played using the teacher or another adult/student as the mirror.
Form: *The student may have difficulty* ■ using the range of appropriate stress, volume, and tone of voice, which contribute towards the richness of language.	**Form:** *The teacher should ensure that* ■ the student is involved in drama and role-playing activities which demand a variety of vocal challenges, for example *The Three Bears, The Three Little Pigs.*
Semantics: *The student may have difficulty* ■ refining expressions of feelings and emotions, for example, simply using 'sad' and 'happy' when more accurate descriptions may be 'angry' and 'delighted'.	**Semantics:** *The teacher should ensure that* ■ over a period of time the student is equipped with the vocabulary necessary to describe feelings adequately, for example, – using appropriate occasions to furnish the student with appropriate vocabulary – choosing stories or pieces of text in which characters express a variety of emotions.

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Strand	
Emotional and imaginative development	
⚠ **Potential area of difficulty**	+ **Possible strategies**
Use: *The student may have difficulty* ■ creating appropriate gestures, postures, facial expressions, and tones in imagined situations.	**Use:** *The teacher should ensure that* ■ ample opportunity is given to talk about expressions of emotions, drawing attention to the physical aspects of emotions and, if necessary, giving examples from real situations and situations from stories.

Delayed development in metacognition
The student may have difficulty
■ comprehending and/or realising that he/she has not understood
 	
■ understanding his/her own limitations in communicating when asked to see the world from another person's perspective
 	
■ in rescuing a situation where there has been a breakdown in communication
 	
■ asking questions in order to obtain information
 	
■ distinguishing what is known from what is unknown in any given situation.
	Metacognition—strategies that enable understanding
	The teacher should ensure that
	■ questions are used frequently to establish that the student has understood what has been said
	■ other personnel within the school are aware that the student may have difficulties understanding fully what has been said
	■ the student is encouraged to reflect on what has been understood and to verbalise this
	
	■ the student is given opportunities to communicate when it is important that the correct information is given and understood, for example
	  – asking the student to give instructions to another student on how to make Rice Krispie buns
	  – inviting the student to take on the role of the teacher and give instructions as to what is to be done
	
	■ the student is encouraged to be aware of the other person in the context of a conversation by
	  – making eye-contact, varying tone of voice, using facial expressions, etc.
	  – looking out for clues in interpreting the feelings and reactions of others.
	(Students may need a lot of practice in this area, in order to develop and improve his/her communication and interpretation of messages.)
	
	■ the student is equipped with strategies to recap and recall what is known.

A responsive framework for teaching literacy skills

The approach to the development of reading and writing skills espoused by the *Primary School Curriculum* is firmly based on oral language development. This is as relevant to students with mild general learning disabilities as to other students. The approach to oral language development as it is outlined in these guidelines so far will, therefore, provide the starting point for the development of literacy skills. Reading and writing should grow organically from the student's oral language experience.

The approach to emergent reading and reading in the English curriculum is developed in *Primary School Curriculum: English, Teacher Guidelines,* pages 50-61. It indicates that, in order to become a competent reader, the student needs to become proficient in recognising and identifying words. To acquire this ability he/she needs to use information from different sources. The most important of these sources of information, or cueing systems, are based on the student's

- knowledge of letter-sound relationships (graphophonic cues)

- his/her experiences and understanding of the world (meaning or semantic cues)

- knowledge of the forms of language (syntactic cues).

Decoding letter-sound relationships

Because of the potential difficulties the student with mild general learning difficulties may have in the area of language development his/her ability to use semantic and syntactic cueing strategies may be limited. It is essential, therefore, to give particular attention to developing the student's ability to decode written symbols, and to translate written symbols in the form of letters, syllables, and words into sounds. This ability to use graphophonic cues is central to the process of enabling students with mild general learning disabilities to read.

A key element in acquiring knowledge of sound-letter relationships is the development of phonemic and phonological awareness.

- **Phonemic awareness** is the knowledge that words are composed of individual speech sounds.

- **Phonological awareness** involves a range of skills such as the ability to analyse words into their constituent speech sounds, the ability to combine speech sounds, and the ability to detect rhyme and alliteration.

The approach to the development of phonemic and phonological awareness is set out in the content objectives of the English curriculum and on pages 58–61 of *Primary School Curriculum: English, Teacher Guidelines*. It stresses activities such as

- saying and hearing nursery rhymes and rhymed stories

- reproducing rhymes

- clapping and dancing to syllabic rhythms

- playing 'I spy' games involving onsets and rimes

- segmenting of sentences into individual words

- segmenting of words into syllables

- matching the length of a word to its utterance.

It also highlights the importance of strategies such as onset and rime in developing the student's ability to decode letter-sound relationships and the use of predicting, checking, confirming, and self-correcting in extracting meaning from text.

Potential areas of difficulty

The tables in this section of these guidelines indicate potential areas of difficulty the student with mild general learning disabilities may have in acquiring reading and writing skills, and suggest possible strategies the teacher can use to address these difficulties. Since the purpose of the guidelines is to facilitate the teacher in enabling students to access the *Primary School Curriculum*, the potential areas of difficulty and the suggested strategies have been linked directly to the four strands of the English curriculum.

Students with mild general learning disabilities may experience difficulties in acquiring skills associated with literacy that other students acquire easily or incidentally. These include

- the ability to use decoding strategies effectively

- an understanding of the vocabulary and concepts associated with literacy

- the ability to scan from left to right in a line of text and from right to left when going to a new line

- the ability to use the predictability of language in the reading context

- learning and retaining sight vocabulary

- reading for the sense of the text

- reading fluently

- connecting text and illustration

- self-correcting reading

- developing skimming and scanning skills

- acquiring basic information retrieval strategies

- understanding diagrammatic text

- developing comprehension skills

- sequencing ideas

- developing hand-eye co-ordination

- manipulating and organising writing materials

- developing the ability to write independently

- using punctuation

- appreciating how the intended audience should influence writing

- completing a piece of work in a given time.

In enabling the student to develop these skills and overcome other potential difficulties the teacher needs to provide explicit instruction and a range of supports that are targeted at the needs of the individual student. Detailed strategies are provided in the tables that follow and take account of the following significant issues:

- **The importance of oral language development:** The approach to oral language development is treated in the earlier section of *Approaches and methodologies* in these guidelines, and its importance in providing a base for the development of literacy skills cannot be overemphasised.

- **Decoding letter-sound relationships:** The approach to the development of phonemic and phonological awareness has already been referred to and is also addressed at relevant points in the following tables. In the case of students with mild general learning disabilities attention also needs to be given to the development of visual and auditory discrimination skills. These would include

  - developing an awareness of the orientation of text—left to right and return

  - attention to similarities and differences

  - matching letters and words

  - recognising words that sound alike

  - recognising words that look alike

  - scanning for target words

  - auditory sequencing—matching oral expression with visual symbols as the teacher writes

  - developing sight vocabulary.

- **Choice of text:** Choice of text has a crucial role to play in the development of individual students' literacy skills. Choosing texts is addressed in the *School planning* section.

- **Using teacher-designed texts:** Using teacher-designed texts is an essential strategy in addressing literacy skills with students with mild general learning disabilities. Approaches to using teacher-designed texts are addressed in the section on school planning.

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- **The importance of the teacher as model**—The strategy of modelling the reading process and the different skills involved in reading, comprehension, and writing should be a central and consistent element in the approach to developing literacy.

- **Assessment**—The progress of students in developing literacy skills can be monitored by using a range of assessment procedures including standardised tests, high frequency word lists, and by keeping up-to-date word banks for individual students. In a mainstream classroom this type of support can be used successfully with all students in addressing development in reading and writing skills. It is important that the class teacher plans for assessment in collaboration with the learning support teacher and the resource teacher, where appropriate. Such an approach can eliminate the danger of isolating the student with mild general learning disabilities from peers during the literacy lesson.

- **An integrated language experience**—One of the principles on which the approach to English in the *Primary School Curriculum* is based is that the three language skills are closely linked. This is reflected in the structure of the curriculum. Oral language, reading and writing are integrated in the achievement of the wider language learning goals enunciated in the strands:

- **Receptiveness to language**

- **Competence and confidence in using language**

- **Developing cognitive abilities through language**

- **Emotional and imaginative development through language.**

It is important that the student with mild general learning disabilities has a rich and consistent experience of oral language activity based on his/her individual experience. The activities this would entail are stated in detail in the content objectives of the oral language strand units of the English curriculum. These describe a comprehensive range of oral language activities with which the student needs to engage. The approaches to the acquisition of reading and writing skills can be based on this oral language experience, and this in turn will in turn generate further aspects of oral language activity.
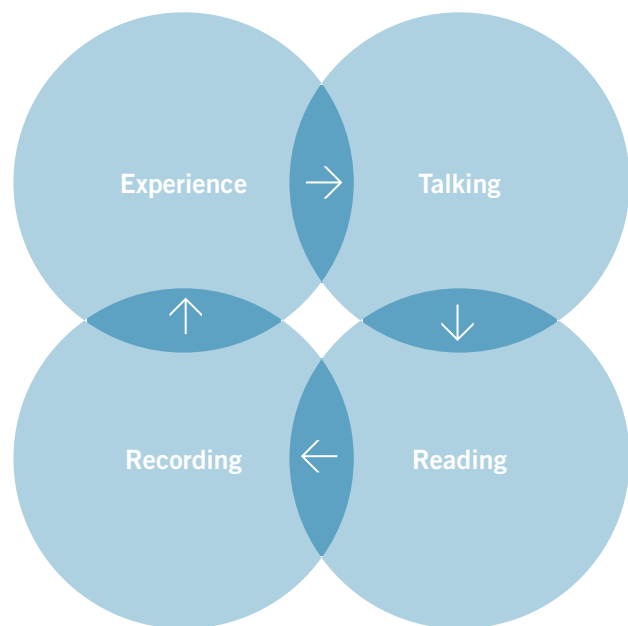
An example of an integrated language approach

The following is an example of how reading can be approached through the use of language experience material in the context of an integrated language experience:

- The students talk about an experience they shared. Different objects, pictures, photographs, charts, etc. can be used to aid the recall of details.

- The students create the text that the teacher writes, acting as scribe. The contribution of individual students will vary and in some cases may be limited to one sentence.

- The teacher ensures that the pace of the writing matches the student's oral expression.

- The teacher models the reading and invites the students to read. Students can focus on using different skills, for example the left, right and return orientation of text.

- Students have the added support of their own particular contribution to the text. This can be 'targeted' first and then they can move to engaging with those parts of the text created by other students. This is a valid use of repetitive text in which the text is 'mapped onto' the language of the student.

- Students can support each other in the reading process and they can learn to self-correct.

The great merit of such an approach is that students are actively engaged in an emergent reading process with a text, created by them, based on their own experience.

Providing supports

In addition to the different approaches, methodologies, and teaching strategies the teacher uses in approaching the acquisition of reading and writing skills, the student with mild general learning disabilities will require a range of further supports. The most important of these include

- physical aids
- visual cues
- verbal cues
- tactile reinforcement
- the creation of reasonable expectations
- the setting of manageable targets for development
- encouragement and praise for real effort
- enabling the student to see his/her success.

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A responsive framework for literacy development

Strand
Receptiveness to language

⚠ **Potential area of difficulty**	+ **Possible strategies**
Reading:	**Reading:**
The student may have difficulty	*The teacher should ensure that*
■ with delayed oral language development	■ the student's oral language activity addresses particular difficulties
■ in understanding text being read aloud by the teacher	
■ at the level of understanding a word, understanding a sentence or understanding structure *'a friend of her sister lost her bag'*—may be confused about who lost a bag, or at all three levels	■ the student has an extensive experience of teacher-designed texts based on his/her oral language experience and appropriate to his/her level of development
	■ the student has consistent opportunities to discuss the text, for example: meanings of words, phrases, sentences, recalling details, predicting
■ in developing a proper concept of the nature of the reading process	■ the student's reading experience is closely linked with his/her oral language experience
■ in understanding the language of books and reading	■ the language of books and reading is explicitly taught, for example: cover, page, next page, sentence, paragraph
■ in engaging with books.	■ the student has ample experience of handling books and browsing through books, initially books with pictures only, and later books with pictures and text.

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Strand	
Receptiveness to language	
⚠ **Potential area of difficulty**	+ **Possible strategies**
Reading (continued): *The student may have difficulty* ■ in learning sight words and in retaining sight words learned ■ in distinguishing minimal differences in words ■ in coping with the demands of being an active listener ■ in sequencing ideas heard in a story ■ in gaining a sense of the development of a story ■ in developing a sense of rhyme ■ with hearing or may be prone to fluctuating hearing loss.	**Reading** (continued): *The teacher should ensure that* ■ the student has opportunities to use learned sight vocabulary frequently in meaningful contexts ■ sight vocabulary is carefully chosen and prioritised (see *Choosing books* and *Choosing texts* for *teaching reading*, page 14, 15) ■ minimal differences in pairs of words where the difference can be highlighted and where contextual clues are available to student, are taught explicitly ■ the student experiences highly interactive texts that demand a response from the reader *lifting the flap, making sound effects, using 'look behind you'* phrases ■ predictable, repetitive, but fun stories are chosen initially ■ sequences of actions in a story are acted out to support the development of sequencing skills ■ stories are discussed using props and/or puppets ■ stories are dramatised ■ students are given opportunities to interact with the story ■ discussion is used to take the story beyond the text ■ the student has a lot of experience of rhyme, repetition and oral closure ■ the predictability of oral language is capitalised on ■ texts that rhyme are used to enable the student to appreciate that words that look alike sound alike, and that if they sound alike they will look alike ■ he/she is aware of clues that indicate a hearing problem ■ close contact is maintained with parents/guardians and other teachers ■ when necessary a student is kept near and facing teacher ■ visual and gestural supports are used.

Strand
Receptiveness to language

⚠ **Potential area of difficulty**	**+ Possible strategies**
Writing: *The student may have difficulty* ■ in developing the ability to write independently, and may not see the skill of independent writing as empowering ■ in making judgements about his/her own written work ■ in manipulating and spatially organising writing materials.	**Writing:** *The teacher should ensure that* ■ he/she provides a developmental experience of writing that is attractive to the student, based on his/her immediate needs and abilities, and involves writing for real and personal purposes, including – realising that any symbol, mark or letter can be meaningful – writing his/her name and the initial letters of his/her name – writing the names of family members – writing the names of people who are important to the student – labelling and tracing – copying from the blackboard – writing for special occasions—birthdays, Christmas – organising miscellaneous and matching sentences, and writing the sentences – having plenty of experience of manipulating text – basing writing on oral activity and experience – talking about his/her writing with the teacher and others – having plenty of practice in holding and using a writing implement – having plenty of practice in forming letters – using ICT where appropriate, particularly if the student experiences difficulty in manipulating a writing implement. *The teacher should ensure that* ■ the lesson is structured so that all aspects of the task of writing are clear to the student, presenting the sequence in symbolic or pictorial form ■ supports are used which stabilise materials on the desk *Blu-tack, Velcro boards* ■ students are allowed to work on the floor *providing more room, ensuring things don't fall.*

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Strand
Competence and confidence in reading and writing

⚠ Potential area of difficulty	+ Possible strategies
Reading:	**Reading:**
The student may have difficulty	*The teacher should ensure that*
◼ in scanning from left to right and right to left in reading tasks *within a word, within a phrase, moving from one line to the next*	◼ from the beginning, all literacy tasks are presented and performed in left to right sequence
	◼ choose a short rhyme and write as the student watches, preferably from the student's dictation, using large motor movements
	◼ model reading, touching each word with a pointer
	◼ encourage the student to do the same, providing hand/wrist guidance if necessary
	◼ ensure that the student has plenty of practice in sequencing letters and words *Velcro boards, start cues*
◼ in reading independently *attaining a reading age of 8 years on a standardised test*	◼ ensure that the student experiences a well-planned programme directed towards developing phonemic and phonological awareness to enable him/her to decode sound/letter relationships
◼ in using decoding strategies and structural analysis	– initial sounds and rhyming syllables (onset and rime)
◼ in developing sight vocabulary *mastering the first 100 words on the Dolch list*	– final sounds
	– saying and hearing nursery rhymes and rhymed stories
	– reproducing rhymes
	– clapping and dancing to syllabic rhythms
	– playing 'I spy' games involving onsets and rimes
	– segmenting of sentences into individual words
	– segmenting of words into syllables
	– matching the length of a word to its utterance
◼ in using contextual clues	◼ ensure that the student has a rich experience of environmental print *signs, labels, directions*
◼ in developing a sense of purpose in relation to the reading process	◼ ensure that the student is aware of high frequency words as they occur in the reading context.
◼ in developing positive attitudes regarding literacy	
◼ in feeling empowered by what he/she has achieved.	

Strand
Competence and confidence in reading and writing

⚠ **Potential area of difficulty**	+ **Possible strategies**
Reading (continued):	**Reading** (continued):
The student may have difficulty	*The teacher should ensure that*

■ in reading for the sense of the text
  reading individual words, 'barking at print'
■ in reading fluently
■ in connecting text and illustration to provide contextual cues
■ in identifying and quantifying his/her own competence
■ in experiencing success in the reading process
■ in developing any significant level of self-esteem about his/her reading ability
■ in acquiring literacy due to the delayed development of oral language ability.
	■ the student experiences a range of reading activities that will support the development of sight vocabulary
	  language experience materials, large format books, labelling, flash cards, library corner
	
	■ the student has a consistent experience of discussion in the reading experience
	■ the student experiences reading in a way that gives a sense of achievement, but at the same time challenges the student
	■ the student develops a working social sight vocabulary
	
	■ the student sees the reading process modelled regularly
	  appropriate tone, voice modulation, rhythm
	■ the student has a wide experience of collaborative reading
	  language experience materials, large format books
	■ the student has opportunities to read aloud text that is well within his/her reading capabilities
	■ the student discusses the text and then reads it again
	
	■ the student has help in using illustration as a contextual support for the text
	■ the student acquires the vocabulary to talk about his/her reading
	
	■ the student has an enjoyable experience of the reading process
	■ the student has a carefully-planned, step-by-step experience of the reading process
	■ the student engages with reading material that is most appropriate to his/her stage of development
	  teacher designed text, printed text the student can read comfortably.

Strand
Competence and confidence in reading and writing

⚠ **Potential area of difficulty**	+ **Possible strategies**
Reading (continued):	**Reading** (continued):
The student may have difficulty	*The teacher should ensure that*
■ in acquiring literacy due to the delayed development of oral language ability	■ the student's oral language learning potential is maximised
	■ text is carefully selected for every curriculum area, in order to match it to the student's oral language ability
	■ text with appropriate illustrative content is chosen
	■ reading is modelled, pointing to each word, and encourage the student to copy
	■ multiple opportunities are provided for the student to use the correct form
■ in self-correcting reading	■ strategies used are clear and consistent
	■ self-correcting reading is modelled *making deliberate mistakes and correcting self*
	■ he/she does not intervene too quickly
	■ the student is allowed time to self-correct
	■ questions are used to prompt the student *Does that seem right? How can you be sure? What word would make sense here? What does the picture tell you? etc.*
	■ the student reads the table of contents
	■ the student uses picture clues
	■ the student pays attention to headings
	■ the student reads the first word in each sentence (possibly using a coloured dot)
	■ the student verbalises the task after instruction
■ in achieving a level of fluency that will enable him/her to develop skimming and scanning skills.	■ the student searches for key words
	■ the student highlights key words with a highlighter pen
	■ the student breaks the task down into constituent elements
	■ the student deals with one item at a time
	■ the student uses colour coding to match cue and response.

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Strand
Competence and confidence in reading and writing

⚠ Potential area of difficulty	+ Possible strategies
Reading (continued): *The student may have difficulty* ■ in retaining concentration when search-reading or in acquiring more than minimal skills in this area ■ in acquiring basic information retrieval skills due to lack of organisational skills ■ in understanding information that is expressed diagrammatically ■ in understanding the language and mode of expression in poetry.	**Reading** (continued): *The teacher should ensure that* ■ symbolic or pictorial forms as well as words are examined ■ poems are chosen carefully ■ the student is given a consistent experience of poetry ■ the student is encouraged to respond to poetry in a variety of ways *discussion, writing, visual arts, drama* ■ he/she is aware that the student's experience of a poem may be much greater than any response to the poem that the student might indicate.

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Strand
Competence and confidence in reading and writing

⚠ **Potential area of difficulty**	✛ **Possible strategies**
Writing:	**Writing:**
The student may have difficulty	*The teacher should ensure that*
■ understanding the listener's perspective	■ the student appreciates the use of formal and informal oral language
■ appreciating how the intended audience should influence the nature of a piece of writing	*explicit instruction, role-playing*
	■ different tasks are matched to different students' needs without removing the stimulus of a surmountable challenge
■ in completing a piece of work in a given time	*completing one task rather than filling in gaps in a workbook*
	■ the student is encouraged to use known sight vocabulary to create new meanings
■ in developing writing skills to match reading skills because of motor constraints	■ the student is given opportunities to manipulate text using ICT
■ in using punctuation marks	■ the difference between punctuated and unpunctuated speech is demonstrated (using a tape recorder)
	■ the student is allowed to correct deliberate punctuation errors in speech on the part of the teacher
	■ the student is helped to develop signals or gestures indicating punctuation in speech
	■ the student is enabled to use written down speech to convert these signals or gestures into punctuation marks
	■ personal directional and tracking cues are devised for the student, which he/she may then use independently.
	■ the student looks back and self-corrects work
	■ the student questions whether what is written makes sense
■ in developing hand-eye co-ordination	■ the student is allowed to copy from a photocopied page rather than from the blackboard
confusion with left to right aspects of reading and writing, reversals, mirror writing	■ the student devises personal cues that will help him/her to develop and support independence
	■ an alphabet strip is attached to the top of the desk or written it on top of a page to provide a model
■ in making judgements about his/her own written work	■ the student is enabled to understand where errors have been made, how they can be rectified, and how to rectify them
■ in seeking help.	■ examples are given of errors that occur
	■ the student is encouraged to correct deliberate errors made by the teacher.

Strand
Developing cognitive abilities through reading and writing

⚠ Potential area of difficulty	+ Possible strategies
The student may have difficulty	*The teacher should ensure that*
▪ in developing higher order skills *inferring, sequencing, predicting, getting the main idea, reasoning, responding creatively and critically*	▪ oral language contexts are used for the development of these skills ▪ concrete materials and the student's own experience are used as a context for the development of skills ▪ thinking is modelled for the student *the teacher asks and answers the question* ▪ open questions are used to challenge the student *What would happen if the tap were left on with the plug in the sink?*
▪ in sequencing ideas in a story	▪ predictable, repetitive, and fun stories chosen ▪ the sequence of actions in a story is acted out
▪ in understanding the function of text	▪ he/she acts as a scribe in writing down the student's words *one word at a time* ▪ the potential of speech bubbles both in text created by the student and in commercially produced reading texts is explored ▪ phrases rather than single words are used for notices and messages ▪ real and functional reasons for writing speech down and for reading it are created
▪ recalling and retrieving information gained from reading	▪ the student has mastered the decoding of a piece of text before being asked to recall or retrieve information contained in the text ▪ concrete support strategies are provided *using a highlighter pen to denote key words or phrases while reading or re-reading text* ▪ an individual student is allowed sufficient time for recall and retrieval activities
▪ in understanding some of the more sophisticated features of poetic language *metaphor, symbolism.*	▪ the student is involved in discussing the poem ▪ metaphorical and symbolic meanings are made explicit.

Strand	
Emotional and imaginative development through language	
⚠ **Potential area of difficulty**	**+ Possible strategies**
The student may have difficulty ■ relating a story to his/her own experience	*The teacher should ensure that* ■ the story is related to the student's own experience ■ what he/she knows of the student's experience is used to guide the student towards relating the story to his/her experience
■ expressing personal feelings in drawing or writing, due to motor problems and delayed writing skills *likes and dislikes, sensory experiences*	■ this difficulty is addressed in every curriculum area ■ writing activities are based on extensive oral language activity ■ the student is offered a range of response options ■ the student is encouraged, in the initial stages, to use text with a high illustration content and a low text content
■ in empathising with characters encountered in text due to an inability to see the world from any perspective but his/her own.	■ he/she models reactions to text *gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, verbal response* ■ the student is encouraged to imitate these reactions before being asked to participate at an imaginative level ■ the student is helped to express what he/she may see as negative or weak reactions to characters in the story.

Exemplars

Integrated learning through a theme approach

Why choose *themes* as an approach?

■ Integration in the curriculum makes the connections between different areas of knowledge/ learning explicit for students with mild general learning disabilities.

■ Themes facilitate the transfer of knowledge/ skills from one context to another and from one curricular area to another.

■ Learning can be personalised to build and draw on students' individual experiences, thus learning is made more meaningful.

■ Students can see the learning plan and map their own progress more easily.

■ Students are more secure in the familiar context of the learning situation which a theme approach provides.

■ Themes provide a dynamic way of planning and make learning real, relevant, and realistic.

■ A theme accommodates different levels of functioning.

■ Themes incorporate a spiral approach, making it possible to revisit topics at increasing levels of sophistication.

■ A theme can develop from the egocentric child out to the family/school/local community/wider community.

■ The world works in a connected way (organised, linked, and interrelated) and themes make it possible to present the world *as it is* to students with mild general learning disabilities.

How to choose themes

In order to choose themes that provide both valuable teaching contexts and relevant learning opportunities, the following issues should be taken into consideration.

■ Themes should be age-appropriate and related to students' interests and experiences.

■ The cross-curricular potential of a theme should be exploited. It should be possible to address a theme in at least four curricular areas.

■ It is possible to target different learning levels of ability through a theme.

■ The theme should offer a variety of new experiences both in and out of the classroom.

■ Children's literature should be examined for potential triggers for themes and for supports for selected themes.

Suggested themes include

■ self—family, friends, school, homes, and neighbourhood

■ self in the wider environment

■ growth and life cycles

■ clothes (see exemplars to follow at 5 levels)

■ food, shopping

■ weather and seasons

■ animals—zoo/farm/pet/wild/tame animals, insects, sea life

■ people who help us—doctor/postman/policeman/ teacher/nurse/dentist

■ water

■ hobbies

■ transport

■ celebrations-birthdays/Christmas/Easter/Halloween/ weddings.

The exemplars that follow illustrate how the theme **Clothes** may be explored at five different levels.

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Exemplar 1: **Communication and Language**

| **Strand:** Oral language | **Theme:** Clothes | **Level 1:** Early learning |

When planning at this level please refer to the guidelines for teachers of students with moderate general learning disabilities.

Strand	Learning outcomes for the student
	The student should be enabled to
Receptiveness to language	■ respond to simple directions, for example, put on your coat, take off your gloves ■ respond to and request location of own clothes ■ respond by pointing and give a minimal verbal response to a song cue, *'Are you wearing _____ today? (yes or no)*
Competence and confidence in using language	■ respond in song, *'Are you wearing ___ today, yes or no?* *Yes I'm wearing _____ today, yes, yes, yes.'* ■ take the lead in song, after a period of time following sufficient practice ■ draw attention to his/her own clothes, *'Look at my …'*
Developing cognitive abilities through language	■ state that a specific garment is *for indoor or outdoor wear, for wet or dry weather, for an adult or for a child* ■ indicate what part of the body garments are intended for *a hat is worn on the head, shoes are worn on feet and gloves are worn on hands*
Emotional and imaginative development through language	■ ask for dressing up clothes, *'I am going to deliver the post, so I will need …!'.*

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Exemplar 2: **Communication and Language**

| **Strand:** Oral language | **Theme:** Clothes | **Level 2:** Infants |

Strand	Learning outcomes for the student
	The student should be enabled to
Receptiveness to language	■ participate in discussion with an adult/a small group relating to personal experiences, for example going shopping for new shoes ■ listen to and respond to the contributions of his/her peers in small group conversations held in the presence of an adult
Competence and confidence in using language	■ initiate/sustain conversations about his/her own clothes ■ use adjectives of colour to describe clothes ■ describe a garment using the correct vocabulary ■ use prepositions in the context of getting dressed/undressed, for example *putting on … taking off … pulling up …*
Developing cognitive abilities through language	■ name articles of clothing and when they would be used, for example *I wear pyjamas in bed, I wear my swimming togs when swimming, I wear my boots when it is wet* ■ look at pictures and deduce the time of the day, the weather conditions, and where people may be going by looking at how they are dressed ■ identify deliberate errors in a sequence and suggest how they may be corrected, for example *dressing a doll, putting on clothing in the wrong order, using a series of pictures depicting routine of getting up in the morning, or the order of courses at meal times*
Emotional and imaginative development through language	■ give directions as to how to dress a teddy/doll or a two-dimensional cut out ■ express likes and dislikes in relation to his/her own clothes and the clothes of people seen in magazines ■ discuss reasons for the choice of clothes from catalogues when assembling a shop montage.

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Exemplar 3: **Communication and Language**

| **Strand:** Oral language | **Theme:** Clothes | **Level 3:** First and second class |

When planning at this level please refer to level 2.

Strand	Learning outcomes for the student
	The student should be enabled to
Receptiveness to language	■ respond to cues in a story requiring prediction and projection ■ participate in group discussion and paraphrase what others have said ■ identify people from details given about the clothes they wear, distinctive features, etc.
Competence and confidence in using language	■ talk about and describe his/her own clothes, and express preferences for particular garments or special features ■ use descriptive words of colour, shape, size, texture, and function in relation to his/her own clothes and/or uniform ■ use some words to describe quality features of fabric—shiny, soft, silky, rough, furry, etc.
Developing cognitive abilities through language	■ describe the sequence of dressing/undressing ■ listen to another person's description of dressing/undressing and identify errors in detail ■ name clothes appropriate for a variety of weather conditions or occasions, and give simple descriptions
Emotional and imaginative development through language	■ select and name clothes to bring on an imagined journey, and explain why these clothes are appropriate and why others would be unsuitable ■ make reference to clothing particular to specific cultures that he/she may have seen or that may have been detailed in pictures or stories previously seen or heard.

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Exemplar 4: **Communication and Language**

| **Strand:** Oral language | **Theme:** Clothes | **Level 4:** Third and fourth class |

When planning at this level please refer to level 3.

Strand	Learning outcomes for the student
	The student should be enabled to
Receptiveness to language	■ listen and respond to the opinions of others within a small group and later summarise the discussion, for example *Should a uniform be worn in school?*
Competence and confidence in using language	■ use appropriate language and tone of voice in role-playing a telephone conversation both as a listener and as a speaker, for example *making a complaint about a faulty item of clothing* ■ express his/her own opinion about the wearing of school uniforms or about the design of school uniforms, and also discuss a contrary viewpoint ■ describe some differences in clothing worn at different times in the past and in different cultures, for example – *the clothes worn by his/her grandparents/ parents/guardians when they were children* – *clothes worn by subjects in paintings* – *clothes worn by their peers in other parts of the world (influence of climate)* ■ use words to describe different types of textures and fabrics, for example waterproof, camouflage
Developing cognitive abilities through language	■ explain the process of making wool, beginning with the sheep and concluding with a jumper ■ plan and talk about designs for a new school uniform (summer/winter), or a PE outfit
Emotional and imaginative development through language	■ create and participate in role-playing a scene in a shoe shop ■ use the language-appropriate to a given scenario, for example *interviewer/interviewee as an investigator/witness to a robbery giving a description of the robber.*

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Exemplar 5: **Communication and Language**

| **Strand:** Oral language | **Theme:** Clothes | **Level 5:** Fifth and sixth class |

When planning at this level please refer to levels 3 and 4.

Strand	Learning outcomes for the student
	The student should be enabled to
Receptiveness to language	■ respond in a formal way to questions asked by others, for example *survey type questions concerning issues of relevance* ■ interpret gestures, facial expressions and tone of voice of others in role-playing a teacher/student 'debate' concerning uniforms
Competence and confidence in using language	■ make a formal oral presentation to others demonstrating the results of a survey relating to school uniforms ■ ask questions about/describe an event, for example a wedding
Developing cognitive abilities through language	■ use specific vocabulary to compare different fabrics, for example *natural/man-made fabrics—colour, pattern, and design features, suitability for different purposes* ■ justify selections made for a design project, for example ■ *the choice of fabric for a specific garment in terms of colour, pattern, and texture, and the use and selection of words which describe special properties—camouflage, waterproof, flammable, etc.*
Emotional and imaginative development through language	■ collaborate with others in preparing and rehearsing a script for a 'fun' fashion show using a tape recorder ■ discuss 'a day in the life' of a fashion model (following the viewing of a video), and play the role of interviewer or interviewee (TV presenter or model).

Literacy: The emergent reader

Theme: Food

Strand	Reading	Writing
Receptiveness to language	**Strand unit: developing concepts of language and print**	**Strand unit: creating and fostering the impulse to write**
Prior to embarking on the development of literacy it is important that ample time has been given to discussing the topic of food in an oral context within the classroom.	*The student should be enabled to* ■ listen to and respond to rhymes and stories recited or read by the teacher (it is advisable to include material where dialogue is repeated, for example '*The Gingerbread Man*') ■ experiment with and enjoy rhyming words in a story ■ read his/her own sentence as dictated to the teacher, for example *I like bananas* ■ display lists of food the students like/dislike, accompanied initially by the picture of the food ■ introduce activities involving matching ■ picture/picture, picture/word, word/picture, word/word ■ re-organise words on a card to form a sentence, for example *pizza, like, I, likes, chocolate Paul.*	*The student should be enabled to* ■ gain an understanding of writing words one at a time by – watching the teacher at work – dictating a sentence to accompany a word or a picture to the teacher and observing the teacher writing it – being encouraged to make marks as if writing a shopping list for food for a party. (Parents/guardians may be encouraged to engage the student in similar activities.)

Strand	Reading	Writing
Competence and confidence in using language	**Strand unit: developing reading skills and strategies**	**Strand unit: developing competence, confidence and the ability to write independently**

The English curriculum states the importance of a print rich environment. It is important that students are involved in using and discussing books, and their presentation: title, cover, pictures and words, conclusion, where they begin, how they continue.
 	
The student should be encouraged to
■ tell the story in his/her own words
■ create a book on his/her own or in collaboration with others.
 	
In selecting material it is important that the teacher uses material appropriate to the level of ability, interest, and attention span of the student.
	The student should be enabled to
	■ consolidate reading skills *reading from left to right, returning to the left when the end of the line has been reached*
	■ read books to others that are suitable to their age and level of ability
	■ read library books with simple repetitive texts
	■ read his/her own picture books, for example
	'My book of favourite foods'
	- I eat cornflakes for breakfast.
	- I eat an apple at break, etc.
	- Mary says 'I like cheese'. John likes yoghurt'
	■ read for information, for example
	  – find an item on a shopping list
	  – read social sight vocabulary—bus, toilets, open, closed
	■ enjoy rhyming words: *jelly/belly/telly, look/cook/book, wear/tear/bear.*
		The student should be enabled to
		■ trace the alphabet from a copy on his/her desk
		■ trace simple texts
		■ copy the alphabet
		■ copy simple texts
		■ assemble split sentences appropriately and write out the completed sentences, for example
		My sister_____likes toast for breakfast.
		Mary has sausages and _____ potatoes for tea.
		John is eating a yoghurt _____ for lunch.
		■ organise the assembled sentences to make a story and then to write the story
		■ organise instructions for the completion of a task in the correct order and write them out, for example
		Preparing a glass of orange
		then add water
		finally drink it
		next pour in some orange
		first get a glass.

Strand	Reading	Writing
Developing cognitive abilities through language	**Strand unit: developing interests, attitudes and the ability to think**	**Strand unit: clarifying thought through writing**
The student can be engaged in talking about ■ the characters in the story ■ what the characters may be thinking ■ the sequence of events ■ what may happen next. The teacher may initiate discussion by asking questions requiring students to reflect before answering, for example *'How do you think Hansel and Gretel felt when they realised the birds had eaten the breadcrumbs?'* Acting out stories assists in enabling the student to identify with characters in the story and with their reactions and emotions.	*The student should be enabled to* ■ read books collaboratively, where there is clear evidence of a sequence of events ■ create his/her own books following a sequence—organising pages so as to show a logical progression, choosing an appropriate title, deciding on a suitable cover ■ act out the events in a story in order to reinforce the importance and logic of sequence ■ give an account of preparing to go to the shops and of the route to the shop.	*The student should be enabled to* ■ draw or create montage images for his/her own books, drawing from personal experience ■ write captions and titles that have been discussed, whether traced, copied or in freehand ■ write out shopping lists.

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Strand	Reading	Writing
Emotional and imaginative development through language	**Strand unit: responding to text**	**Strand unit: developing emotional and imaginative life through writing**
Where writing skills are delayed it may be more appropriate for responses to be presented in the form of paintings and montages. The use of suitable computer software may also be of benefit.	*The student should be enabled to* ■ respond to a story drawing from his/her own experiences ■ share his/her own experiences of food: likes, dislikes, etc. ■ read others' sentences relating to likes and dislikes.	*The student should be enabled to* ■ draw/create a montage and/or write captions for personal responses to food, for example – my favourite dinner/ breakfast/lunch – lunch for a monster/alien ■ discuss these in a class or small group setting in the form of question and response.

Appendix

Oral language developmental milestones

Language development in junior primary (3-5 years)

Communication

- The student can express needs in a variety of ways, including talk.
- The student can express likes and dislikes.
- The student can use language to come and go in familiar company.
- The student can take part appropriately in short conversations as a listener and as a speaker.

Form

- The student can use simple sentence structures.
- The student may still have difficulty in producing some sounds of the language in speech, for example l, sh, ch, j, z, v, (50% of 3-5 year olds); r, th, zh (some trouble up to 7 years).

Semantics

- The student has a vocabulary of nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs to convey meanings for his/her everyday experiences.
- The student learns new vocabulary in dialogue with a fluent model, on a topic of joint interest.

Use/thinking

- The student can use language to make simple observations about people and events in his/her environment.
- The student can use descriptive language about colour, shape, and size.
- The student can use vocabulary to describe common emotions such as happy, sad, cross.
- The student can use language to direct the actions of others—*Show me! Put it here!*
- The student uses language to monitor his/her own play experiences.
- The student can ask questions to find information—*What? What for? Why?*
- The student can listen attentively and follow a story told or read.
- The student can talk about a story and relate it to his/her own experience.
- The student can describe a recent past experience, and sequence events with adult support.
- The student can use language to anticipate events likely to occur in the near future.

Metacommunication

- The student is not yet aware of his/her own abilities to use language.

Metalinguistics

- The student shows interest in the language itself—in words that have the same meaning, etc.
- The student can classify familiar vocabulary into nouns and verbs (naming words, action words).

Language development in junior primary (5-8 years)

Communication

- The student can initiate conversation with familiar adults and students.
- The student can maintain conversation appropriately as a listener and as a speaker.
- The student can modify his/her talk in different social contexts—familiar/formal.

Form

- The student can speak in sentences using a variety of simple conjunctions—and, but, because, when, if, etc.
- The student can use verb tenses, plurals, the negative, and relational terms appropriately.
- The student speaks clearly and fluently with normal intonation and stress.

Semantics

- The student has an effective vocabulary of nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and prepositions to enable him/her to understand and express meaning in everyday activities.
- The student learns new vocabulary from experiences and from story.

Use/thinking

- The student can ask questions to get information about the present, past, and future.
- The student can express his/her own feelings appropriately and is aware of the feelings of others.
- The student can use descriptive language about size, colour, shape, texture, and function.
- The student can use language to describe his/her own experience and to sequence events chronologically.
- The student can use language to instruct another to perform a simple task or game.
- The student can use language to compare items according to quantity, quality, scale, temporal sequence, etc.
- The student can classify objects into common categories and will use the category name.
- The student can explain cause and effect, for example, if, if not, because, etc.
- The student can talk about and retell familiar stories.
- The student can use language imaginatively to invent people, actions, and events, and can create simple story sequences.
- The student can predict outcomes of stories, actions, and events (concrete and familiar).
- The student can use language to project into the thoughts and feelings of others in relation to familiar events.
- The student can understand and use the language of the classroom.
- The student can follow the teacher's instructions.

Metacommunication

- The student can use language to explain that he/she has not understood.
- The student understands the effectiveness of his/her own language when explaining, and makes attempts to adjust to the needs of the listener.

Metalinguistics

- The student shows interest in the language itself—in words that have the same meaning, etc.
- The student can classify familiar vocabulary into nouns and verbs (naming words, action words).

Language development in senior primary (8-12 years)

Communication

- The student can initiate and sustain conversation with both familiar and unfamiliar people.

- The student can participate in a group discussion, observing simple rules for turn-taking and maintaining the topic.

- The student can progress from a restricted code (familiar situation) to a more elaborate code (formal or general situation).

- The student can give opinions on a range of topics, and will consider alternatives and discuss them.

Form

- The student can speak in grammatically complex sentence structures, for example embedded sentences such as *'The girl who has a new coat asked me to get her a hanger so that ...'*

Semantics

- The student has at his/her disposal a wide range of vocabulary (nouns, verbs, etc.) to convey intended meanings.

- The student learns new vocabulary largely through reading.

Use/thinking

- The student uses sequenced questions to pursue a particular line of enquiry.

- The student can instruct others to play a complex game, build a model, or draw a picture.

- The student can explain actions and events clearly and concisely.

- The student can use language to plan ahead for an activity or event.

- The student can use language to infer and reason from information received.

- The student can respond to story personally, critically and creatively using literal recall, inference, etc.

- The student can create his/her own imagined sequences in language.

- The student can predict, and project into, the thoughts and feelings of others in a range of situations familiar, unfamiliar, real, or imagined.

Metacommunication

- The student is aware of language itself—double meanings, puns, ambiguities, jokes, etc.

- The student is aware of the effectiveness of his/her own messages and of received messages, and is able to adjust accordingly.

Metalinguistics

- The student can correct his/her own and others' grammar.

- The student can discuss the sounds, structures, and content of his/her own language.

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