



## Editors' Comment

*Parents and teachers have become increasingly aware of children's learning difficulties and the need for individualized help. As a result, the number of children eligible for special educational services has tripled in recent years. A child's eligibility for services is determined after a thorough diagnostic evaluation delineating the child's strengths and weaknesses, which form the basis of recommendations made by a committee of school personnel in collaboration with parents. Research has shown that early recognition and referral for services is critical to ensure the best possible outcome in terms of a child's academic functioning and psychological health.*

*Among the possible recommendations for special services are referrals to specialists such as a Speech/Language Pathologist and/or a Learning Specialist. Parents often request more detailed information to understand how these specialists actually work and how their intervention relates to the child's functioning in the class setting. In this issue of the NYU Child Study Center Letter we review the manifestations of disabilities in language and in basic learning skills, describe how these disabilities affect academic mastery, how Learning Specialists and Speech/Language Pathologists function, and the ways in which they work with teachers and other specialists as a team to help each child be successful.*

HSK/AG

## SPECIALISTS IN THE CLASSROOM: THE GIVE AND TAKE

### Introduction

When children are having difficulty in school, they usually show warning signs that they may need help. A child may have problems with learning, sustaining attention, coping with homework, self expression, specific skill mastery, or organization and prioritization of assignments. Finding appropriate help early is critical in ensuring the child does not become discouraged and fall behind. The first step in the process of determining what, where, and when help is needed is to obtain a complete assessment. (See Learning Disorders and Brain Organization). The findings of the assessment then serve as a base for planning an individualized educational plan. The recommendations for educational services usually include individual or group work with a Learning Specialist and/or a Speech/Language Pathologist (SLP). Parents often ask what Learning Specialists and Speech/Language Pathologists actually do; in this article we review the work commonly done by these types of specialists.

### What does a Speech/ Language Pathologist (SLP) do?

In order to understand the work of an SLP, it's first necessary to understand the different aspects of language.

### What is language all about?

Language has several components or strands:

- Phonology – perception and production at the sound level (articulation/pronunciation, sequencing of sounds, processing all the sounds in a word)
- Semantics – meaning at the word level, which includes vocabulary and word retrieval
- Morphology – the structure of words such as the meaning of word endings (ed/s/ing)
- Syntax – grammar and word order
- Discourse – order and sequence of sentences in conversation or in writing
- Pragmatics – use of language in social situations including turn-taking
- Metalinguistics – thinking about/reflecting on/talking about language including figurative and ambiguous language (humor, literary devices, puns, ambiguity, irony, etc.)

### Language has two major realms:

- Receptive (or incoming) language: does the child take in (process), remember, and understand (comprehend) what he hears and sees, as in listening and reading?
- Expressive (or outgoing) language: does the child formulate language in speaking and writing?

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## How do we recognize language weaknesses?

A language weakness may be manifested in either the processing (receptive) aspect or the production (expressive) aspect of language.

### *Processing and perception*

- Deficient processing of sounds
- Limited understanding of word order
- Poor appreciation of word roots, tenses, and inflections
- Weak understanding of how word order affects meaning
- Inability to think about how language works

### *Production*

- Trouble producing the sounds of language
- Not knowing how to use word meanings effectively
- Unable to modify words to convey precise meaning
- Problems communicating beyond the level of sentences
- Poor use of language in social contexts

## How do weaknesses in these areas affect language?

Children may:

- Not speak clearly
- Not understand the sound system and have trouble spelling
- Have poor listening skills, fatigue, and distractibility
- Have trouble with foreign languages
- Have a limited vocabulary, limited word meanings, and an inability to see how words are connected
- Not be able to comprehend sarcasm or jokes
- Have trouble in social situations
- Have trouble explaining their reasoning
- Speak slowly and have trouble collecting their thoughts
- Need more time to process what they hear
- Have trouble organizing and ordering their thoughts in

speaking or writing

- Have trouble with math word problems or other content-based learning

## Speech and Language Pathologists can work in various settings and combinations --

in a therapy room with an individual student, with small groups in the classroom, with the whole class, or as a consultant with the classroom teacher. As the SLP consults with the classroom teacher and the learning specialist, he/she may develop language activities for small groups that coordinate with classroom work, such as:

- Social skills and conversation
- Story sequencing
- Phonological awareness – rhyming, blending, and syllabication
- Categorization
- Vocabulary development
- Guided reading
- Writing process

## Overall goals of language therapy

– the SLP aims to help the child:

- Increase saliency of underused and/or unfamiliar words, thereby increasing comprehension
- Group and frame language into comprehensible units by reducing rate, complexity, and volume – speaking more slowly, simply, and saying less
- Increase awareness of language as symbolic and abstract, dynamic and flexible (With very young children: sound play and word play and with older students: inference, multiple meaning, humor, and nuance)

## What does a Learning Specialist (LS) do?

A Learning Specialist can work together with classroom teachers and other specialists, with individual students in the classroom, or with parents and other adults in the child's life.

**Learning Specialists develop flexible plans of providing support:**

- Push-in services may be provided in the classroom in the form of mini lessons
- Pull-out services are provided in a separate room; they build on the mini lessons, build skills, apply rules, and provide practice

**Learning Specialists consult with teachers to plan and accommodate for students' needs, such as:**

- Providing multi-sensory methods of instruction
- Improving organizational skills
- Implementing learning strategies
- Breaking assignments into substeps
- Reducing volume of work product
- Placing fewer problems per page
- Checking off boxes next to questions
- Using aids – word processor, tape recorder, calculator, voice-activated software, books on tape, and outlining software
- Providing accommodations such as scribe, language substitution, or waiver, and extended time

**Learning Specialists work with individual children in the class, in groups, or individually. They focus on:**

Reading and writing basics are often identified as learning problems. In the early grades, the Learning Specialist focuses on decoding and fluency, skills which are basic to learning to read. In the middle and upper elementary years, the Learning Specialist focuses on reading issues such as comprehension and developing strategies and skills that help a child to be a more independent and effective learner in the classroom. Writing is introduced in the early grades

and its importance is stressed throughout all of the grades. The LS teaches strategies for sentence, paragraph and essay formulation and organization. In addition, the LS develops techniques for intervention such as:

- Use of explicit instructions
- Test-taking strategies
- “Talk self through” instructions
- Teach technology
- Work systems
- Simplify and clarify
- Math in real life
- Delineate “safe” places to talk about social issues
- Breathing and other relaxation strategies

**Learning Specialists work with parents and other adults to:**

- Demystify learning difficulties by openly discussing strengths and challenges
- Build on strengths and provide for positive feedback
- Form alliances and enlist the cooperation of parents and other adults in the child’s life through the use of techniques such as e-mail, homework on the web, communication books, and daily report cards

When classroom teachers and specialists meet frequently with each other and with parents, they develop a collaborative plan that can be applied to the classroom, and the benefits of special services are maximized.

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