

Language Development in Children with Learning Disabilities

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ABOVE THE STUDY

Language development in children with learning disabilities is best understood not as a uniform delay, but as a set of uneven, interacting profiles that affect how children acquire, process, and use language over time. The label Learning Disabilities covers a wide range of conditions commonly including Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, and Dyscalculia each with distinct pathways but shared implications for language and literacy. A productive commentary must therefore move beyond a one-size-fits-all model and focus on how specific cognitive-linguistic processes shape outcomes.

A consistent theme is the centrality of phonological processing. Many children with learning disabilities especially those with dyslexia struggle to represent, store, and manipulate the sound structure of language. This affects phonological awareness (e.g., segmenting and blending sounds), which is foundational for mapping speech to print. When these mappings are fragile, decoding becomes effortful, and reading fluency lags. The downstream effect is reduced exposure to print, which in turn limits vocabulary growth and syntactic development a classic “Matthew effect” where early gaps widen over time.

Vocabulary development in this population often shows a split between breadth and depth. Children may learn labels for familiar concepts but have shallower semantic networks—fewer associations, weaker category knowledge, and less precise word meanings. This becomes visible in tasks requiring inferencing, figurative language, or academic vocabulary. Because much vocabulary growth in the school years occurs through reading, difficulties in decoding and comprehension can further constrain lexical expansion. Direct, explicit teaching of word meanings, multiple exposures, and opportunities to use new words in varied contexts are therefore essential.

Morphosyntax presents another area of vulnerability. Some children exhibit difficulties with grammatical markers (e.g., tense, agreement) or complex sentence structures (e.g., passives, relative clauses). These challenges can be subtle in conversation but become pronounced in academic tasks that demand precise language, such as explaining processes or summarizing texts.

Importantly, morphosyntactic weaknesses can also impede reading comprehension, since understanding sentence structure is key to constructing meaning from text.

Working memory and processing speed play a mediating role across these domains. Limited verbal working memory can make it hard to hold and manipulate linguistic information—affecting sentence comprehension, note-taking, and following multi-step instructions. Slower processing speed can reduce the efficiency of both oral and written language tasks, leading to fatigue and reduced participation. These are not peripheral issues; they directly shape how language is learned and used in classroom settings.

Heterogeneity is a defining feature. Some children show relatively strong oral language but significant literacy challenges; others have broader language impairments that affect both spoken and written domains. Co-occurrence with attention or executive function difficulties can further complicate the profile. This variability underscores the need for comprehensive assessment that examines phonological skills, vocabulary, grammar, discourse, memory, and processing rather than relying on a single test score.

Intervention has increasingly shifted toward structured, explicit, and cumulative approaches. For literacy, systematic phonics instruction paired with phonological awareness training remains a cornerstone. However, focusing only on decoding is insufficient. Effective programs integrate vocabulary, morphology, and comprehension strategies, such as teaching how to use context, identify text structure, and generate inferences. Morphological instruction (e.g., prefixes, suffixes, roots) is particularly valuable in the upper elementary years, as it supports both word reading and meaning-making.

Equally important is the integration of oral language with literacy instruction. Rich classroom talk, guided discussions, and explicit teaching of narrative and expository structures help students organize ideas and express them clearly. Scaffolded writing through sentence frames, graphic organizers, and iterative feedback can bridge gaps between language formulation and written output. Assistive technologies (e.g., text-to-speech,

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speech-to-text) can reduce barriers, allowing students to demonstrate knowledge without being constrained by decoding or transcription difficulties.

Family and environmental factors moderate outcomes. Consistent language-rich interactions, shared reading, and supportive school-home partnerships can buffer risk. Culturally and linguistically responsive practices are essential, particularly for multilingual learners, to ensure that differences in language background are not mistaken for disorder.

In sum, language development in children with learning disabilities is shaped by interlocking cognitive and linguistic processes that evolve across development. Progress depends on early identification, precise profiling, and sustained, evidence-based support that targets both the mechanics of language and its meaningful use. When instruction is explicit, integrated, and responsive, many children can build the language foundations necessary for academic success and participation.