

The Adaptive Teacher:

the importance of language in education

Guidance for early career teachers

National Action Enquiry for Educational Psychologists

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Contents

Overview	2
The adaptive teacher	2
Speech, language, and communication	2
Language for social and emotional development	2
Language for learning.....	2
Written language	2
The Adaptive Teacher	3
What is adaptive teaching?	3
Five adaptive teaching strategies	3
Speech, language, and communication	5
What are speech, language and communication needs?	5
Five supportive strategies for speech, language and communication	6
Language for social and emotional development	7
How do we support language, social, and emotional development?	7
Language for learning.....	10
Why is language important for learning?	10
Five supportive strategies for language for learning.....	11
Adapting our written language for children and young people	12
Why do we need child-friendly versions of reports?	12
References	14

Overview

The adaptive teacher

1. Take time to know your class and their individual learning approaches.
2. Be responsive in the moment to how your pupils are learning.
3. Be flexible with your lessons and teaching – don't be afraid to step away from the lesson plan to ensure success for all learners.

Speech, language, and communication

1. Environment first – How we can set up a classroom to give the best talking, listening, and communicating opportunities for all learners? How does the physical space support pupils to regulate their emotions?
2. Say less, more slowly, and give more time for thinking, processing, and responding.
3. Use visual resources to reinforce your spoken language and routines in class.

Language for social and emotional development

1. Create an emotionally safe and secure environment where all emotions are valid.
2. Think about the developmental stage of your learners and provide learning experiences that meet their developmental needs.
3. Support the development of emotional language through modelling, connection and validation, exploration, teaching, and having conversations about emotions.

Language for learning

1. Working on attention and listening skills will support learners' interaction and communication skills.
2. Visual supports can be used to support understanding, in place of verbal communication, and for structuring phrases and sentences in written work.
3. Questions should match a learner's communication skill level – are they using speech for naming, describing, sharing stories, or solving problems?

Written language

1. Learners have the right to information that is easily accessible.
2. Use language that is easy to understand, non-judgemental, and transparent.
3. Through adapting your written language, you can empower pupils and create a more inclusive environment.

The Adaptive Teacher

What is adaptive teaching?

Adaptive teaching is a twofold approach in which prior to teaching, teachers identify potential barriers to learning through effective planning, and then during teaching, continually adjust their teaching based on ongoing assessment and feedback, responding to pupils' learning needs in real time. This differs from differentiation where teachers would preplan different tasks for groups.

Core principles of adaptive teaching

1. High expectations for all – all pupils can engage with core lessons; the role of the teacher is to be responsive and reactive to pupils' learning needs.
2. If formative assessment ([Scottish approach to assessment.pdf](#)) doesn't indicate learning, consider re-teaching in different ways.
3. Real-time adjustments based on pupils' responses through using ongoing formative assessment.
4. No 'one-size-fits-all' approach – need to recognise pupils learn in different ways and at different paces but do not need different content. The key is to provide dynamic support.

Five adaptive teaching strategies

1. Use quick continuous formative assessment i.e. mini whiteboards, online polls, thumbs up or thumbs down etc.
2. Scaffold instead of simplifying i.e. use sentence starters, thinking prompts, modelling examples step by step.
3. Use flexible grouping i.e. dynamic changing partnerships, rotating roles etc.
4. Adjust questioning to stretch and support i.e. adjust the depth of questions based on pupils' responses.
5. Teach pupils how to reflect on their learning and develop.

What does adaptive teaching look like in the classroom?

- Differentiation will be appropriate and flexible and will push learning forward without putting limits on learning.
- Teaching will be flexible, and topics re-taught in different ways if required.
- The class teacher will adjust a lesson plan to ensure that the main goal of 'getting it' is achieved by all.
- The classroom will be full of scaffolding and modelling to support pupils in their understanding.

For example: In a Maths lesson there will be equipment out on the table for any pupil who wants to use it e.g. cubes, place value charts etc to support their learning.

"If our pupils can't learn the way that we teach we must teach the way that they learn" (Ignacio Estrada)

Three take aways for adaptive teaching

1. Take time to know your class and their individual learning approaches.
2. Be responsive in the moment to how your pupils are learning.
3. Be flexible with your lessons and teaching – don't be afraid to step away from the lesson plan to ensure success for all learners.

Speech, language, and communication

What are speech, language and communication needs?

Speech, language, and communication are skills we use in everyday life. They are used for:

- Listening and attention
- Understanding what is being said
- Speaking
- Social skills

Speech, language, and communication needs (SLCN) are estimated to now affect approximately 20% of school-age children in the UK (Speech and Language UK, 2023). These needs put children and young people at greater risk of developing emotional, social and behavioural difficulties, mental health difficulties, and lower academic attainment.

Some pupils may have an identified SLCN – such as Autism, Developmental Language Disorder, stammering – but for some pupils, particularly those in the earlier years, you as a teacher may be the first to notice some signs of difficulty with their speech, language, and communication.

Most pupils who are neurodivergent (e.g. Autism, ADHD) will also experience sensory difficulties. The classroom and school can be a very busy, noisy, smelly, and bright place and some pupils will have strong preferences and needs to seek or avoid sensory input.

What does speech, language and communication look like in the classroom?

When pupils are in the classroom, there is a high level of demand on their language and communication:

- Increasing reliance on written language
- Increasing vocabulary demands
- Pace of new information
- Complex social information
- Complex verbal information
- Sensory demands

Most of the time, these demands overwhelm a pupil when there is too much information for them to process and they will show an adult they are overwhelmed through their behaviours. This is why it is always important to look behind the behaviour – what language and communication demands were going on in the classroom before a pupil became distressed or withdrawn? Does the child present with externalised behaviours (e.g. leaving the room, hitting, shouting) or internalised behaviours (e.g. not answering questions, withdrawing from peers)?

Five supportive strategies for speech, language and communication

1. Use the [CIRCLE framework](#) to evaluate your physical environment, social environment, and structures and routines in the classroom.
2. Use consistent visuals across the whole school to support understanding, e.g. visual timetable, now and next board, checklists. Some pupils understand symbols, but some pupils may require physical objects to understand the link to an instruction or an activity, e.g. a plate to show the transition to lunch.
3. Reduce the language you are using to match the language skills of the pupil. For some, this may be using their name at the start of an interaction and a single word for an instruction, or a short phrase that is very familiar to them and is linked to a routine.
4. Consider the sensory aspects of your classroom and what can be changed. Do you have dimmer switches for your lights? Can you use blinds to adjust the light coming into the room? How do you monitor and change noise levels? What movement opportunities can you introduce for a pupil or the whole class?
5. Give pupils time to process the spoken information you are giving them and speak at a slower pace – pupils with language difficulties require more time to process information and show better understanding when information is given more slowly ([Witherstone, 2024](#)).

Three take aways for speech, language and communication

1. Environment first – How we can set up a classroom to give the best talking, listening, and communicating opportunities for all learners? How does the physical space support pupils to regulate their emotions?
2. Say less, more slowly, and give more time for thinking, processing, and responding.
3. Use visual resources to reinforce your spoken language and routines in class.

Language for social and emotional development

The acquisition of speech, language and communication skills can have a powerful impact on a child's social and emotional development. For some children language skills will emerge as they grow and develop from early childhood. However, for others, there may be things that get in the way of their speech, language and communication developing in the same way. If a child is experiencing difficulties with language it can impact on their social and emotional development as:

- They may not have the words to explain how they are feeling so instead show this through their actions and behaviours.
- They may find it hard to convey their needs and desires.
- They may find it difficult to understand the feelings of others.
- They may find it harder to regulate their emotions if they are finding it difficult to express how they are feeling and what they need to help.
- They may find it harder to participate in group activities, to establish and maintain friendships and engage in reciprocal conversations.

How do we support language, social, and emotional development?

What does language, social, and emotional development look like in the classroom environment?

1. Create an emotionally enriched language environment e.g., have visual supports and labels to show emotions, consider classroom resources that will allow children to explore and express their emotions in a safe and playful way and incorporate emotional language into activities such as stories, songs and rhymes.

2. The nurture principles tell us that “Learning is understood Developmentally “, meaning that we need to think about a child’s developmental stage as all children will be at a different stage of their development (Nurture UK, 2023). For example, we need to focus on what they can do and what they find hard rather than how old they are and what we expect them to do by a particular age. We need to plan learning experiences that meet your learners’ developmental stage.
3. Integrate learning and teaching experiences about emotions across the curriculum, teach key vocabulary, talk about how we experience them and reflect on how we manage them.
4. Be culturally respectful of our learners, for example, not all cultures have the same words for emotions and some cultures and communities express emotions in different ways.
5. Establish a structured time in the class that allows opportunity for discussion and reflections about how learners are feeling e.g., check ins and endings.
6. Be able to be adaptive and flexible to meet the needs of the class at a given time as children need to be emotionally in a place to learn and we may need to adapt our planned lesson to meet the class need. Name, acknowledge and discuss when a plan is needing to change, connect with the feelings of the class e.g., I think you are all very excited after the school show, so to help bring some of the class energy down, we’re going to listen to our calming music before maths”.

Supportive strategies for language, social, and emotional development

1. Provide an environment that is emotionally safe and secure, where the teacher provides a warm and welcoming approach along with clear and consistent boundaries, with high expectations for all.
2. Model emotional language, use emotional language in conversations, narrate observations of emotions and recognise the emotions of others e.g., “you have a big smile on your face, I think you are really proud of your writing today”
3. Connect, validate and acknowledge how a child is feeling as all emotions are valid e.g., “I wonder if you were feeling...” “I think you are telling me...”, “It’s ok to feel that way”, this helps teach the words they need to express how they are feeling.

4. Acknowledge that we can all experience emotions differently. We need to recognise that for some children emotions might be quite abstract concepts and they may find it really hard to label and talk about them. Again, this is why modelling and describing emotions, along with visual supports, can help support understanding.
5. Think about the questions we ask e.g., “how are you feeling?”, as a child may not have the understanding, language or be in an emotional place to answer this question. They may need you to help support them to work out what these feelings are, how to explain them and how to manage them.
6. Some children may need time and space to process emotions and others may need help from key people to support them process and make sense of what they are experiencing.
7. Think about our use of language and that, sometimes, we might not always correctly identify how the child is feeling. In this situation, it is about naming this and repairing the relationship with the child e.g., “You are telling me that I did not get that right, I said that you were sad but you are actually telling me that you are really annoyed just now”. This will also model to the child how we repair relationships.

Three take aways for language, social, and emotional development

1. Create an emotionally safe and secure environment where all emotions are valid.
2. Think about the developmental stage of your learners and provide learning experiences that meet their developmental needs.
3. Support the development of emotional language through modelling, connection and validation, exploration, teaching, and having conversations about emotions.

Language for learning

Why is language important for learning?

Speech, language, and communication are vital for success and engagement in learning. When pupils are unable to fully talk or communicate effectively with adults and other pupils, or unable to understand the words used in the classroom and play, they face difficulties in joining in and showing what they are learning.

Learners who struggle with speaking and understanding language are six times more likely to be behind in English at age 11, and ten times more likely to be behind in Maths, than peers who have reached expected levels at age 5 (Save the Children, 2016).

Children who experience persistent disadvantage are significantly less likely to develop speech and language skills than those who never experience disadvantage, but good support in the early years and school can overcome this disadvantage (The Communication Trust, 2017).

What does language for learning look like in the classroom?

Pupils may respond in different ways to the language and communication demands in learning particularly when they haven't understood an instruction, or the concept being taught:

- Unable to complete work tasks on time
- Copying the work of others
- Displaying disruptive behaviours
- Appear to refuse to follow an instruction, or follow it incorrectly or incompletely
- Cannot give an answer to a question or give an unrelated answer

[The 'Communication Chain'](#) demonstrates the language demands learners face when engaging in the classroom.

Supportive strategies for language for learning

1. [Pre-teach vocabulary](#) by supporting pupils to make phonological and semantic links to words and explore how new words link to words they already know and use. Visual organisers that use symbols to build understanding are even more helpful.
2. Use consistent visuals across the whole school to support understanding, e.g. visual timetable, now and next board, checklists. Some pupils understand symbols, but some pupils may require physical objects to understand the link to an instruction or an activity, e.g. a plate to show the transition to lunch.
3. Visual supports for language can help pupils to start sentences, organise language, and use correct grammar or varied vocabulary. [Colourful Semantics](#) is one example of this.
4. Give short instructions in the order that they should be followed – avoid using 'before' and 'after'. Some pupils may only be able to follow one or two instructions at a time.
5. Plan questions based on the ability of the pupil and what response you require, open questions that involve a lot of creative talking can be harder to answer. Choice questions (e.g. giving two answers for the pupil to choose) can be progression from a closed yes/no question which requires less processing of new language to give a response. [The 'Blank Levels of Questioning'](#) provides a framework to develop this.

Three take aways for language for learning

1. Working on attention and listening skills will support learners' interaction and communication skills.
2. Visual supports can be used to support understanding, in place of verbal communication, and for structuring phrases and sentences in written work.
3. Questions should match a learner's communication skill level – are they using speech for naming, describing, sharing stories, or solving problems?

Adapting our written language for children and young people

Why do we need child-friendly versions of reports?

Within The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), it states that children should have access to information and materials. This means that information should be easily accessible in formats and languages that are easily understood by children in diverse settings. Additionally, children have a right to express their views and have those views considered on matters affecting them.

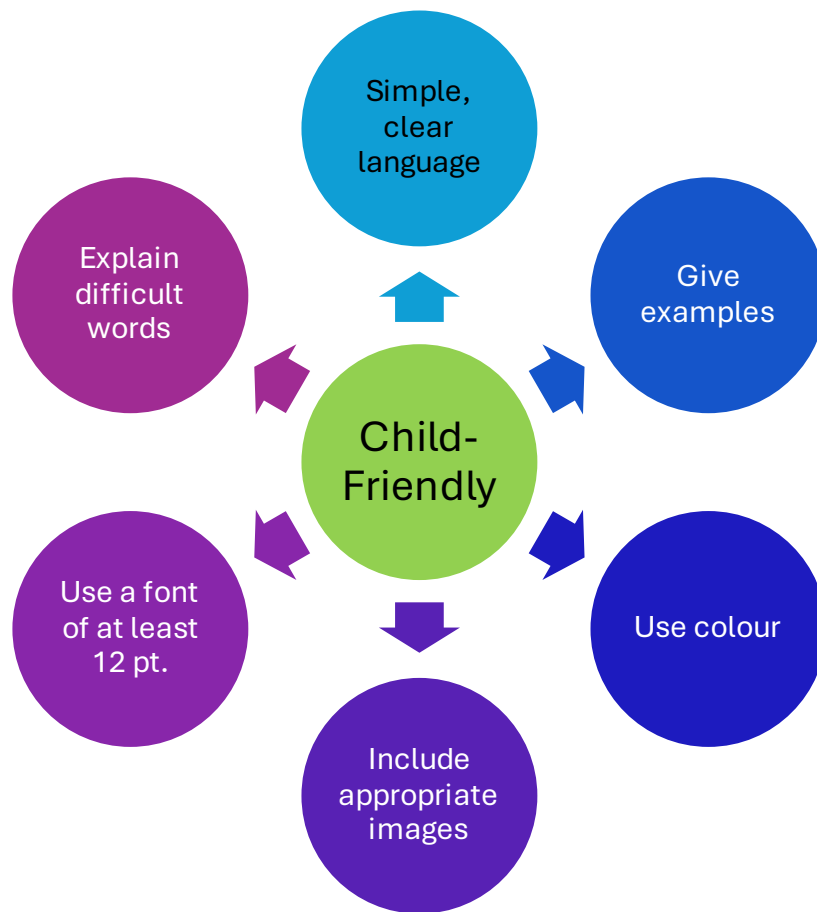
Writing reports in child-friendly language is essential for several reasons:

- **Engagement:** It encourages children to participate in decision-making processes and to understand the impact of their actions.
- **Recognition:** It acknowledges the expertise of the children as change agents and ensures their views are considered in matters affecting them.
- **Inclusivity:** It accommodates the diverse needs of children, including those with additional support needs, ensuring that all voices are heard and considered.
- **Rights:** It upholds the rights of the children, ensuring that they have information they need to exercise their rights and participate in the democratic process.

If you write in a child-friendly language, you can create a more inclusive and informed society where children are actively involved in shaping their own futures.

Child-friendly means:

- the language used should be age-appropriate and accurate
- the design should be accessible to all children and appealing for them to engage with



Three take aways for adapting written language

1. Learners have the right to information that is easily accessible.
2. Use language that is easy to understand, non-judgemental, and transparent.
3. Through adapting your written language, you can empower pupils and create a more inclusive environment.

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