



Ask an Expert: Receptive & Expressive Language



Learn more about supporting students with receptive and expressive language challenges in your classroom! Below is the transcript from our recent “Ask an Expert” Q&A session on [Facebook](#).

[Meet Our Experts](#)

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Q: *I teach high school language classes and expect my students to participate in small group activities. I've tried to strategically group the students, so each group has a mix of abilities. I find that in some of the groups the same students are doing all of the work, while others don't seem to be participating at all. How can I get the students to work more productively and cooperatively in the groups? I am especially concerned about helping the students who are on IEPs and don't talk at all.*

A: This is something that I see a lot -not only in small group work, but also with “turn and talks”, etc. For some students, receptive and expressive language difficulties might be at play here. Specifically, the pace of the discussion may be too fast due to processing, retrieval, and formulation issues.

Here are some things you could do:

- Have clear group expectations; assign roles
- Have clear assignment specific expectations (provide a rubric)
- Provide sentence stems (I like the ones included in this [Collaborative Learning Guide](#)); these could be posted around the room and/or on a resource page
- Provide templates, graphic organizers, etc.

Q: *I am a 4th grade ELA teacher. I have 3 students who can write a basic paragraph, but struggle to add details. They often just repeat what they have already written without adding any new information. Do you have any ideas for helping them improve their writing?*

A: Getting students to elaborate on their ideas can definitely be a challenge. Be sure to spend time on brainstorming prior to writing. This is where some of those details will come from. Here are some of my “go to” accommodations and strategies:

- Use specific graphic organizers (some sample organizers can be found in this resource: [Process Writing: An Overview for Teachers](#))
- Provide prompts: who, what, when, where
- Use a detail circle for expanded writing
- Provide models; have students practice highlighting the details in a model paragraph
- Build Vocabulary (here are 2 good resources: [Improving Vocabulary Across Curriculum](#) and [Importance of Explicitly Teaching Vocabulary](#))
- Provide word banks

Here's one more resource on this topic: Help your students incorporate [Descriptive Language in Their Writing](#)



Q: What are the best strategies we can use as educators to help support both receptive and expressive language?

A: I think that the [Landmark Teaching Principles](#) are a good place to start. These are intended to support students with LBLD.

More specifically, here are some **key strategies** that educators can use to support students with receptive and expressive deficits:

- Allow extra time to process and/or formulate language
- Use templates and graphic organizers to help students organize information
- Follow a [5-step writing process](#)
- Build [vocabulary](#)! use categorization activities; identify relationships between words/concepts
- Provide word banks
- When giving Instructions
 - Call on students by name/gain students' attention prior to giving instructions or asking questions
 - Pair verbal information with visuals
 - Provide clear explanations (simple, concrete)
 - Repeat verbal instructions, as needed
 - Give 1-3 steps at a time; consider the vocabulary and concepts within the instructions
- Monitor teacher's pace, amount, and complexity of language during instruction; teachers often don't realize how much language they are use when explaining a lesson or new concept.
- Conduct frequent comprehension checks
 - Avoid questions such as "Does everyone understand?" or "Any questions?"
- Use directive questioning techniques (Bloom's taxonomy is a good model to follow)
- Post phrases as alternatives to "I don't know" responses (***e.g., "Can you repeat that?", "I'm not sure what to do next.", "I am having trouble thinking of the word, but I can describe it."***)
- Teach [note taking skills](#)
- Teach [active listening skills](#)
- Teach [active reading skills](#)

It is important to be consistent! We often get comfortable mid-year and might pull back too soon on using effective strategies.

Q: Are there any interventions/programs you recommend for students with R/E language deficits?

A: In terms of specific "packaged" programs, I don't have any recommendations. We tend to use an eclectic approach at Landmark. However, here are what I believe to be some key elements when considering interventions for students with receptive and expressive language deficits.

Micro-uniting units: This approach can be replicated in any classroom (e.g., academic support, general education science, speech-language treatment sessions, etc.). Simply put, a unit or lesson should be broken down into its smallest components and presented in a step-by-step manner. Here's a link to an overview of [micro-uniting units](#) with a few examples that you can download for free.

I also think it is important to consider all of the **language parameters** –phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and discourse –when planning intervention for R/E skills. When I'm consulting to schools, I often see this reflected in reading and

Landmark Teaching Strategies



Facebook Q&A

writing programs, but all too often these elements are taught inconsistently (or not at all) to support listening and speaking skills. I really like some of the resources on the ASHA website (ASHA.org). ASHA's Practice Portal has information specific to intervention for Spoken Language Disorders and Written Language Disorders.

More thoughts...often times students with R/E deficits lack the background knowledge needed to learn the information/concepts being taught in their classes. Therefore, activities designed to build background knowledge can be an important part of an intervention plan. I like how this article from LDOnline explains ["Thinking with Language"](#)

Lastly, you might be interested in two of my colleagues' books that connect nicely to this topic ["From Talking to Writing"](#) by Haynes and Jennings and ["Thinking About Language"](#) by Stacey.

Q: I have many students who struggle with expressive language, especially when they are in shut down mode. Suggestions?

A: I was just talking to some teachers about this issue the other day. First, expressive language includes both spoken and written language. Are you seeing this behavior for both speaking and writing tasks? Also, it is important to take a step back and consider why they might appear to be "shutting down", so you can address that particular issue. Here are a few possibilities of contributing factors: problems processing the information, working memory deficits, word retrieval difficulties, difficulty organizing their thoughts, executive function deficits (initiating tasks, focus, etc.). Even when all of these areas are addressed, a student might still "shut down". This may be connected to an issue with motivation. It can be helpful to review Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to understand the role of motivation in learning. [Check out this resource with more free downloads.](#)

Explore these additional resources to help support receptive and expressive Language in your classroom:

- [Tips for Following Directions at School and Home](#)
- [Different Ways of Following Directions](#)
- [Working Memory Overview](#)