

## **Bulletin article: Lexion in Cornwall**

Many Speech and Language Therapists will know from experience that there is a link between speech and language difficulties in children and their subsequent reading and spelling problems. Recent research (Snowling & Hayiou-Thomas, 2006) confirms this, and primary school teachers are fast becoming aware of the need to provide high quality and well-planned support for children's speaking and listening. While the English National Curriculum now emphasises Speaking and Listening as an integral part of Literacy teaching, there is still a long way to go before children with communication difficulties will have their needs met as part of everyday classroom activities.

SLT Frances Girling and her SLTA colleague Karen Stephens, from Cornwall County Council's Children, Young People and Families Department have spent the last three years working in Cornish primary schools. Recently they have been experimenting with a Swedish computer program, Lexion, which seems to provide ideal support for language development, as well as assessing and providing exercises for reading and spelling.

Frances worked for nine years with children and adults with dyslexia, and has a special interest in IT. She works closely with Karen in schools that have been targeted as needing support to meet the needs of children with communication difficulties. These range from children with Statements of SEN to groups of young children needing general support to develop their language knowledge and skills. They plan to work in the school for a term: providing staff training, running groups, working with individual children and giving advice.

One of their major challenges is to conduct assessments that children find interesting, but will translate into activities that can be used effectively by school staff, both in the classroom and in individual or small group support. Frances and Karen find that Lexion seems to meet most of these requirements. Lexion was originally designed by Swedish Speech Therapists as part of remediation work with adults with aphasia, but is now used extensively in Swedish schools to assess and support children with dyslexia. The program has recently undergone a major standardisation for use in the UK and Ireland.

Lexion is based on the concept that children with reading and spelling difficulties have two fundamental difficulties: phonological awareness and phonological processing. The program assesses children's difficulties in these areas, and immediately provides a profile of strengths and weaknesses. This profile is then directly translated into a series of exercises that teach the basic skills of phonological awareness and processing, in a way that children from ages six to 15 years of age can enjoy. Frances has been closely involved in developing Lexion for use in UK schools, and is keen that other practitioners know about its value.

"We use Lexion to help us tease out what children's learning difficulties are. Children enjoy the assessment in a way that is not apparent with most

standardised tests. The assessment is invaluable, but we often learn as much again from working with the children on the program and analysing their responses.”

I observed this for myself recently, when I visited Frances and Karen working in north Cornwall primary schools. Jane is a nine-year-old girl who was extremely reserved when Karen originally started work with her. “She would sit on her hands in front of my laptop computer for as long as 10 minutes, and I had to coax her into interacting with the program.” On the day I visited, Jane quickly loaded the program, and was able to navigate her way around her favourite exercises with ease. Karen attributes her newfound confidence to working with Lexion. “The program automatically sets exercises with exactly the right amount of challenge, in exactly the areas where Jane needs support. Working with a laptop is seen as a high status activity, and because she is achieving well she is more motivated to work on reading and spelling.” This has also helped Jane’s confidence in speaking, and her parents and teachers are delighted with her progress.

Frances has no doubt that there is a link between vocabulary development and reading. “ I suspect that most young children with speech and language difficulties have underlying problems with auditory processing. This shows up later as reading and spelling difficulties. Karen and I are constantly trying to make the link between enriching vocabulary and phonological awareness.”

This approach fits in with the highly influential Rose Report (DfES 2006), which emphasises the need for teachers to provide high quality work on language and phonics. I saw such high quality work when Karen used Lexion with four five-year-old boys in a language enrichment group. They were completely focused for 30 minutes on language activities using an interactive whiteboard. As Karen puts it, “I could have done the same activity with flashcards, but the children would have cooperated for a tenth of the time. Using Lexion provides the children with dynamic activities that allow them to move around, touch the screen and cooperate with each other. This increases their motivation, and makes it more likely that they will remember and learn.”

Michael Jones, MRCSLT, is an educational consultant.

More information about Lexion can be found on [www.lexion.co.uk](http://www.lexion.co.uk)

## References

- DfES (2006) Independent review of the teaching of reading in Early Years settings and primary schools (Rose Report)
- Snowling, M & Hayiou-Thomas, M.E (2006) The dyslexia spectrum: continuities between reading, speech and language impairments. Topics in Language Disorders 26, 108-124

