

# Supporting children with communication difficulties

**Frances Girling** and **Michael Jones** report on a computer-based assessment and learning programme that links language development and reading



Recent research makes a direct link between early speech and language difficulties and later problems with reading and spelling (Snowling, 2006; Snowling and Hayiou-Thomas, 2006).

SLTs working in mainstream primary schools may want to support and advise school staff and provide approaches that link language development and reading for children with delayed language development; those who require general language stimulation or have specific and complex communication needs.

Many teaching assistants have received additional training in supporting children with additional literacy needs and this is proving to be effective in promoting the development of early literacy and oral language skills (Hatcher *et al*, 2006).

There is potential for SLTs and SLTAs to work effectively in schools, with special needs coordinators, teachers and teaching assistants (McCartney, 2004).

However, speech and language therapy advice needs to be relevant and easily implemented if it is to be carried out effectively.

Many parents are willing and able to support their children's learning, so resources that can fit

by Swedish SLTs for use with children between the ages of six and 15 with dyslexia and associated literacy difficulties.

The software has undergone extensive standardisation in UK schools, and many teachers, and increasingly SLTs, are exploring its

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into busy classes and can be used by teaching assistants and parents are clearly going to have the highest chances of success.

In our experience, computer-based assessment and learning programmes can play an important part in meeting children's needs in schools and at home.

One such programme is Lexion, developed

potential for assessing and supporting children with a range of communication difficulties.

The programme is based on the principle that reading and spelling problems are linked to difficulties with phonological awareness and phonological processing.

Children go through a series of short, interactive assessment subtests designed to

highlight key areas in the child's phonological processing, reading and language development.

They find the assessment fun even though it quickly gets to the heart of their difficulties.

Once the assessment is complete the assessor receives a written and graphic profile.

The programme will immediately generate exercises that the child can use at school or at home.

A particularly useful aspect of Lexion is the possibility that these exercises can be sent home or to school via memory stick, disk or email.

Lexion automatically logs progress and the supervising adult can analyse results from a distance and send updated exercises.

We find Lexion is systematic, engaging for children and provides rigorous monitoring of progress.

In common with other programmes used in computer-generated learning, it provides children with a high level of motivation.

This is crucial, as many of the children we work with are keenly aware of their difficulties.

All of Lexion's activities have an element where the computer 'speaks' to the child – giving instructions, or providing encouragement and praise.

This has proved to be an important feature in helping children who are anxious, including those at an early stage of learning English as an additional language, or who have a diagnosis of selective mutism.

Once the assessment is carried out and the results discussed with the special needs coordinator and class teacher the programme can be included in the child's Individual Education Plan and carried out either on the class computer, in withdrawal sessions, in groups or at home.

Exercises can be linked to children's individual needs as well as chosen from a series of 'predefined profiles' linked to the Literacy Strategy requirements for every year and term from Year 1 to Year 9.

This enables the SLT to make recommendations that are specific to the individual child's speech, language and literacy needs, as well as providing exercises that are appropriate to the level of literacy work being carried out in the class.

This type of advice has a high likelihood of being implemented in school, as it is clearly targeted and very 'child and teacher friendly'.

Meeting the needs of children with complex language learning difficulties in mainstream schools can present SLTs and school staff with particular challenges.

Many older children and teenagers develop ways of compensating for their lack of

## Case study

Amy (not her real name) is nine years old and attends her local primary school. At four-and-a-half she was diagnosed with Landau-Kleffner syndrome, the main features of which are seizures and severe difficulties with verbal comprehension.

Her literacy skills have taken a long time to establish, but are now beginning to develop.

Amy is concerned about making mistakes and though she has very neat handwriting, much of her time in creative writing activities is spent rubbing out.

Amy can be reluctant to engage with adults in individual work, though this is necessary to explore her strengths and weakness and to develop appropriate learning strategies that can be used in class.

SLTA Karen Stevens visits Amy in school once a fortnight, monitoring progress and providing appropriate materials. This includes using Lexion.

Karen uses specific games from the programme to stimulate Amy's verbal comprehension.

These include identifying environmental sounds, creative writing exercises and games designed specifically to develop auditory and phonological awareness.

Many of the games feature colour photographs and line drawings as visual clues, as well as clear verbal instructions. These maximise Amy's understanding and chances of success.

It has become apparent that Amy only recognises phonemes if she can see a visual

representation.

As a result she is very unsure about how to spell unfamiliar words through the method of building them up from individual phonemes.

She has built up an enormous sight and spelling vocabulary by memorising words as whole units. Consequently, she is unable to read a word that is new or unfamiliar to her.

By using Lexion, Karen aims to develop Amy's verbal comprehension through Amy's visual skills.

Her literacy skills are also being developed by improving her awareness and understanding of phonemes, and how these relate to letters and syllables in English.

This is essential if Amy is to make progress in literacy and use reading as an important tool to boost verbal comprehension.

An important consequence of using Lexion has been an increase in Amy's confidence and willingness to engage in language activities that are clearly challenging.

This is often the case when children work on computer programmes with an adult working alongside, providing a more relaxed focus for children who are concerned about interaction.

Amy is also more productive when writing using the computer, as she does not need to have recourse to constant rubbing out.

Adults also benefit from the programme by using it to explore Amy's complex learning patterns and devise strategies to meet her needs.

These strategies will include recommending elements of other programmes and activities.

understanding or semantic difficulties.

While these strategies may help them cope with their everyday communication, their educational difficulties are often very apparent in their reading, spelling and creative writing.

One of the key challenges for SLTs is to look closely at these strategies to pinpoint the specific strengths and weaknesses that the children have.

One-off standardised assessments often do not provide sufficient information and we use Lexion as an ongoing 'dynamic assessment' where we work alongside the child, formulate hypotheses about underlying problems and then build up a plan of support (see case study).

Lexion stores data about the user's progress over time, and this can be invaluable in creating a learning profile, as well as providing a body of evidence that we can use to make recommendations about providing support, for example through reports for statements of special educational need.

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