

Teachers need greater awareness of language disorders

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Greater awareness of 'specific language impairment' (SLI), a language disorder, is needed to ensure better outcomes for the 3-6 per cent of UK school children affected by this disability.

Children with SLI have difficulties with most or all aspects of language including grammar, vocabulary and literacy as well as with short term memory. According to new research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), they also have problems with higher order thinking skills. SLI may have a greater impact on these children than the better known disorder, dyslexia.

"The lack of understanding of specific language impairment contrasts markedly with the broader understanding and acceptance of similar disabilities such as dyslexia," says researcher Professor Lucy Henry of London South Bank University.

SLI and dyslexia are similar in that both involve a 'specific' disability, which is generally believed to affect one particular aspect of a child's thinking and ability to deal with information. In the case of dyslexia, the dimension that is affected concerns reading. In the case of SLI, the dimension affected is language with grammar, vocabulary, the understanding of meaning, and the ability to use sounds appropriately all potentially being affected.

"SLI is often diagnosed when it is noticed that a child's speech is poorer than his or her other abilities. The speech difficulties can involve [grammar](#), a small [vocabulary](#) or other aspects of language. In addition, because language is important for reading, around half of [children](#) identified with SLI also have difficulties with reading. These problems are not due to them having a general [learning disability](#), [autism](#), hearing impairments or [brain injury](#)," Professor Henry explains.

This new research also found significant weaknesses with higher order [thinking skills](#) -

including multi-tasking while trying to remember something, generating ideas, finding solutions to new or demanding tasks, and ignoring irrelevant information where necessary.

With these added difficulties children with SLI may struggle to cope with many classroom learning activities. As Professor Henry highlights: "The key aspect for children in the classroom is learning new skills and dealing with novelty - and as higher order thinking skills are exactly the tools required to do this successfully, children with SLI often fall behind their peers".

SLI can, without intervention, continue into adulthood and have very marked, negative consequences for both academic achievement and mental health. "The outcomes in later life for many children with SLI are not particularly rosy," Professor Henry points out. "Between 50 and 90 per cent of those affected by SLI never reach typical levels of language use".

Indeed, existing studies of young adults with SLI in their 30s show that on the whole they have very few educational qualifications, often have difficulty finding stable employment and, lacking the language skills to make good friendships, can become quite isolated. Hence, it is vital that we spread awareness of this disorder, particularly among school teachers, so that we can improve outcomes for the significant numbers of children affected.

Findings indicate that considerable levels of support will be required for children and young people with SLI when they are embarking on any type of learning task. The key issue for teachers is that children with SLI have not only language problems but difficulties in terms of thinking, remembering and planning which touch on a whole range of classroom activities. Importantly, SLI may not be quite as specific to language only as previously thought.

"We hope that this research will raise awareness among all teachers, not just speech and [language](#) specialists, of the complex difficulties that children with SLI face in the classroom," Professor Henry states. "We also hope to raise awareness of the many techniques class teachers can employ which will help children with SLI learn more effectively."

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

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