

Communication needs

Supporting students' diverse needs

February 2025

The support teachers provide is crucial to ensure that all students have the opportunity to engage in learning in safe, supportive and well-managed learning environments. Students may require varying supports depending on their strengths and needs. This practice guide is part of a suite of resources developed in partnership with MultiLit and the Institute of Special Educators to help teachers refine or refresh their understanding and practice of supporting students with diverse needs.

Not all students who require additional support will have a diagnosis of disability or a health condition, and some students may have a combination of needs. Teachers and school leaders must reasonably support all students to access and participate in education. This may require making reasonable adjustments to the learning environment, teaching or the curriculum in collaboration with students and parents/primary caregivers, specialist and support staff, and medical and allied health professionals.¹

This practice guide will help you to support students' communication needs so they can successfully engage in learning and positively interact with adults and peers at school. It has been designed to complement, not replace, existing school and system policies, procedures and guidance.

Understanding communication needs

Communication is a process of transferring messages. It can be formal or informal, and may include spoken and written language and other symbol systems (such as sign languages, pictures or graphic symbols), gestures, facial expressions and body movements. It can include formal languages such as Standard Australian English and contact languages – creoles and dialects such as Aboriginal English. Effective communication underpins learning, social interaction and relationship development.

¹ Alice Springs [Mparntwe] Education Declaration, 2020; Disability Discrimination Act 1992, 2015; 2020 Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005, 2021.

Factors that can affect students' communication needs include hearing loss or difficulties, adverse childhood experiences or acquired, genetic or degenerative conditions.

Additionally, students from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE) speak languages other than English or have languages other than English spoken in their homes. Some LBOTE students do not require English language support, while others are learning English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) and require support with their English language and literacy development. EAL/D students bring many strengths to their learning, including, in many cases, the ability to communicate in one or more languages or dialects other than English. These students may be able to communicate effectively in ways other than Standard Australian English.

Communication needs can affect learning at all levels of the curriculum. Oral language and access to Standard Australian English, through which students learn the curriculum, are important for the development of literacy skills. However, students with significant challenges in the development of oral language skills may still attain literacy skills. For example, for some students, reading and writing can be a robust pathway for communication despite having limited or no spoken language.

Effective communication includes:

- receptive communication (e.g., understanding or comprehending verbal or non-verbal communication)
- expressive communication (e.g., being able to express needs and wants through verbal or non-verbal communication)
- pragmatic skills or the ability to use communication skills in social situations (e.g., making requests and comments, turn-taking, using facial expressions or tone, engaging in conversations or storytelling).

While expressive and receptive communication can be linked, some students may have a disparity between their expressive, receptive and pragmatic skills. This means that students' understanding of language can't always be assumed from how much or how little they can express. For example, students may speak in short sentences with a limited vocabulary but understand most of what is said to them. Students may communicate using non-verbal methods such as augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) systems (using signs, pictures or graphic symbols) and devices (such as tablets, communication boards or speech-generating devices) and not use speech.

Some students with communication needs may need support with:

- following verbal requests, instructions, rules and explanations
- engaging in conversations
- reading, writing and spelling
- learning new vocabulary
- interpreting words that are not used literally, such as jokes, metaphors, sarcasm and polite language
- creating narratives, such as describing real events and fictional accounts
- understanding context
- expressing their ideas, wants and needs to others.

Practices to support students' communication needs

This guide outlines the following practices to support students' communication needs:

- Identify students' preferences, strengths and needs.
- Support students' receptive language.
- Support students' expressive language.
- Support students' use of language for different purposes.
- Explicitly teach vocabulary.
- Support the use of communication aids and systems.

It is also important to consider how you collaborate with students' support networks and plan to support students' diverse needs, including students' emotional regulation, physical needs, sensory differences and social interactions.

Support for students' communication needs is strengthened when:

- positive, collaborative connections and relationships with students and their support networks are established and maintained
- culturally safe and inclusive learning environments are created
- all students are taught and encouraged to understand and support each other's strengths and differences.

Always display calm, consistent and well-managed emotions and behaviour. This models safe emotional expression and behaviours and helps to create a supportive learning environment.

Identify students' preferences, strengths and needs

Teachers should engage with students, their parents/primary caregivers and external professionals to ensure students' preferences, strengths and needs inform supports provided.

To identify students' preferences, strengths and needs:

- Collaborate with students, parents/primary caregivers and allied health professionals (e.g., speech pathologist) to share information and identify cultural and language strengths, and preferred supports and strategies for communication (e.g., AAC devices).
- Observe if students are more engaged in activities that involve less language (such as art, music or physical activities) compared to those that require more language (such as class discussions, answering comprehension questions or writing tasks).
- Use formative assessments to determine vocabulary and concept knowledge and understanding before teaching a new topic.

- Observe students' responses to instructions and explanations delivered in different formats (e.g., orally only, orally with visual supports or simplified instructions with pauses for processing). Check if they can explain or paraphrase instructions and explanations.
- Observe students during different expressive tasks, such as class discussions, role plays, interviews, telling personal stories, describing or summarising. Consider if they can communicate more effectively if offered alternatives to oral language, such as drawing pictures, selecting pictures, making videos or drawing diagrams.

Support students' receptive language

Receptive communication is the ability to understand and comprehend verbal and non-verbal language, such as spoken language, writing or graphic symbols. Students who require help with receptive language may need support to comprehend verbal or non-verbal instructions, rules or explanations. Students with limited vocabulary or who experience difficulty learning new words may need support to:

- learn discipline-specific terms and concepts
- identify main ideas in texts or make inferences, especially when non-literal language is used in speech or text
- summarise.

Some EAL/D students may have receptive language needs in their first language as well as in English.

To support students' receptive language:

- Ensure hearing impairment or issues have been ruled out as a possible cause of receptive language difficulties.
- Use clear, non-ambiguous and explicit language in both spoken and written communication. Avoid non-literal language and words that may have more than one meaning. Polite requests or indirect instructions may not be understood by some students. For example, 'I can hear people talking' may be taken as a literal statement, not a polite request to stop talking. Over time, you may also support students to understand that people sometimes use non-literal language and provide them with or identify examples.
- Slow your rate of speech and allow processing time between steps in instructions. For example, 'Open your maths book to a new page.' [Pause.] 'Write today's date.'
- Explicitly teach new vocabulary.
- Ensure vocabulary is understood. Check student understanding by asking them to explain the meaning in their own words ('Tell me in your words what extinction means'), or use the word in a sentence ('Tell me a sentence that uses the word "progression"'). Display new words and their meanings visually (e.g., on the board, on slides, on a handout or on the classroom wall).
- Check that students are listening and looking at you before giving instructions. Some students with specific needs may find it more difficult to look at the teacher and, in these circumstances, this shouldn't be forced.
- Present curriculum content in a variety of ways to support understanding, including modelling and visual supports (e.g., pictures, diagrams and gestures to support the spoken word).

- Regularly check for understanding after allowing students time to process an instruction or information. Use methods such as asking students to explain, paraphrase or show you what they need to do (e.g., 'Tell me in your own words why it is important to eat fruit and vegetables', 'Tell me why we always add acid to water and not water to acid'). This can support you to problem-solve underlying issues if a student is having difficulty engaging in learning and completing learning tasks. It could be that students do not understand the task they have been asked to do or they are choosing not to do the task.
- Rephrase, re-explain or re-teach information in a different way to support students who don't appear to understand instructions or explanations.
- Break instructions into logical steps and deliver one step at a time. You could provide a visual checklist or schedule for task steps and regular routines using simple text or pictures.
- Use graphics (such as concept maps, story maps, Venn diagrams or timelines) and images to show connections between concepts and ideas to support understanding and retention of unfamiliar or complex verbal material. Using a combination of text and images may help in some circumstances, but it's important not to present redundant or unnecessary information as this can overload working memory. Students may require teaching and practice to create their own meaningful concept maps.
- In verbal presentations, signal when you are presenting key concepts (e.g., 'This next point is really important') and use highlighting in written text to mark important information. It can be helpful to verbally or visually signal the purpose of the next communication act to prime students to know what to do with the language they are about to receive – for example, 'This next part is some information about the topic' 'Now we are going to answer questions about this topic' or 'Now I will give an instruction in three parts.'

Support students' expressive language

Expressive communication is the ability to communicate thoughts and feelings to others through spoken language, gestures, signs and writing. Students may communicate in different ways, and how they express themselves may affect their social interactions with peers and adults, and participation in group work and class discussions.

To support students' expressive language:

- Model a variety of ways of communicating that are appropriate for specific times, places and contexts.
- Repeat and expand on students' short sentences to model vocabulary and use of language for students. For example, if the student says, 'That's fun', you can say 'It's fun playing with your friends.' If a student uses multiple short sentences, such as, 'We went fishing. It was cold. We came home early', you can model 'So you went fishing but came home early because it was cold.'
- Use new vocabulary words in different contexts, emphasising the new word. For example, if the new word is 'vertical' you can refer to the axis in a graph, a line on the blackboard or a drop from a cliff.
- Use visual aids such as visual schedules, images or graphics. Ensure they are simple and that the meaning is clear so they do not lead to cognitive overload.
- Think out loud to model problem-solving, predicting and reasoning. For example, when discussing an incident from a novel or play, you might say 'I'm confused about who was there. I thought only Lionel and Ahmed were in the boat. I need to re-read this bit!' [Reads.] 'Oh, it says here that Natalie got in the boat before the boys arrived. That means there were three of them – Natalie, Lionel and Ahmed – in the boat when the whale surfaced.'

- Allow a wait time of 3 to 10 seconds when a student takes a turn to speak or answer a question. This time allows them to formulate their ideas and construct a response. Ensure peers understand and respect the time students need for thinking before responding.
- Ask questions to extend a student's response or turn it into a discussion. Where appropriate, use open-ended questions. For example, 'Why is this animal classified as a reptile?' instead of 'Is this animal a reptile or a mammal?'
- Organise activities that require different forms of communication (e.g., role play, puppets, group projects or group presentations), providing scaffolding and support.
- Explicitly teach and model narrative skills, such as recounting personal experiences, retelling stories and writing fiction. Narrative skills underpin later academic writing.
- Explicitly teach and model expository skills, such as giving information or instructions to others (e.g., step-by-step directions or a recipe).
- Implement a buddy system where a student is paired with a peer who can assist and model communication.
- Encourage students to talk about their drawings or narrate their play.
- Be aware of the differences between Standard Australian English and the other languages and/or dialects students may speak, as well as the differences between the communication protocols of the classroom and the cultural groups within your classroom. Use this awareness to support students in learning Standard Australian English and the classroom communication protocols. Acknowledge and celebrate differences.

Support students' use of language for different purposes

Pragmatic skills are important for communication in social interactions. They include turn-taking, active listening, staying on topic, tone of voice, facial expressions, body language, gestures and being able to adjust language based on the situation. Pragmatic skills generally develop as students grow older, though some students may need support to use their communication skills to make a request, comment, tell stories or narratives, repair communication breakdowns and participate in other social interactions such as conversations.

- Plan age-appropriate interactive activities that require different communication skills, such as requesting, sharing, commenting, persuading and describing (e.g., group presentations, role plays, narrating a play, talking about their drawings) and explicitly teach, model and scaffold students' learning.
- Model how to repair a communication breakdown. For example, 'Sorry, I'm not sure what you meant. Can you tell me again using different words or show me again in a different way?'
- Explicitly teach and model how to use strategies for asking for help or clarifications. This could include signals such as hand raising, displaying objects on their desk signifying the need for help or having a designated peer to provide help. Encourage students to be specific rather than just saying they can't do something: 'Tell me which part of the problem you have worked out and where you are stuck.'
- Explicitly teach and model the skills needed for interaction, such as starting a conversation, changing topics, staying on topic and ending a conversation.
- Explain the importance of facial expressions, gestures and body language. Help students recognise and respond to these cues.
- Guide students in adjusting their language based on the audience, setting or context (informal or formal).

Explicitly teach vocabulary

All students benefit from the explicit teaching of new vocabulary, but students with more limited vocabularies may need more intense instruction. A broad vocabulary is needed for strong oral and written language comprehension and expression.

To support students' vocabulary:

- Pre-plan which words you will teach, and develop age-appropriate definitions and practice activities. For example, the word 'mammal' is important to units on animals and their classification. For younger students, focus definitions on observable features (has fur, controls its body temperature, feeds its young milk). Older students can learn about mammary glands, a hinged lower jaw and the diaphragm.
- Pre-teach vocabulary to students who find it difficult before they encounter it in context, particularly complex vocabulary or discipline-specific terminology. Students may be given a list of new words and definitions (perhaps with visual supports such as pictures or diagrams) to refer to as needed.
- Introduce new words by providing a brief explicit definition, linking the word to students' experiences or existing knowledge if possible. For example, when being introduced to 'eutrophication', students may be reminded of other terms that include 'troph' relating to nutrition such as 'autotroph' describing plants. This will help to:
 - provide negative as well as positive examples (e.g., an Ancient Greek statue is an antiquity because it is an object from a long time ago, but a plastic lunchbox is not because it is not from a long time ago)
 - explain the word category (verb, noun, etc.)
 - brainstorm similar words
 - repeat a brief definition when you use the word until students have learned it
 - ask students to define the word in their own terms and/or put it in a sentence
 - discuss synonyms and opposites to help students associate new words with learned vocabulary
 - point out prefixes, suffixes or root words.
- Provide practice with hearing, saying and writing new words in a range of contexts (e.g., class discussion, answering questions, spelling and developing lists of synonyms and opposites).
- Provide supporting activities (e.g., matching a word to its definition, generating opposite words, guessing a word from clues, sorting words into categories, writing sentences that include the word and acknowledging and celebrating students when they use a new word).

Support the use of communication aids and systems

Students who do not primarily use verbal speech for communication may use some form of AAC device as their voice, along with communication through their facial expressions, body language, sounds or behaviour. It is important to collaborate with the students, parents/primary caregivers and any allied health professionals.

An AAC device may be a paper communication book, a board with pictures or letters, or an assistive device that provides voice output when the student touches symbols or spells words (e.g., tablet with text-to-voice software or a dedicated speech output device). Some devices allow students to use eye gaze or switches instead of touching or typing.

To support the use of communication aids and systems:

- Familiarise yourself with the communication system and strategies used, and ensure students using the device can participate in the learning taking place in the classroom.
- Liaise with parents/primary caregivers and allied health professionals, such as a speech pathologist, about the AAC device. Teachers and parents need to be confident in using the device themselves. Just like students who use spoken language, those who use AAC devices will need the language modelled on their device to expand their language through their preferred method (e.g., AAC).
- Ensure the AAC device is always available. It is the student's voice. It may be helpful for a student to have access to both low-tech (paper board or book) and high-tech options (tablet) for different purposes and to ensure that the student is provided with consistent access to a system for communication if a device stops working.
- Give students time to think and compose messages as the AAC device may be slower than verbal speech. Do not pre-empt their communication so that they have equal opportunity to express themselves and be included.
- Provide students using an AAC device with the same opportunities to answer and ask questions, participate in discussions and informal conversations and other activities where communication skills are practised.
- Provide extra desk space so the AAC device is accessible while the student is working with books, a computer or other equipment.
- Consider the suitability of seating, positioning, fatigue or pain when planning lessons for students using AAC devices.
- Educate the student's peers about how the AAC system works and how they can interact using AAC. Provide opportunities such as group work where peers can interact.
- Ensure all support staff who work with the student know how to use the AAC device and feel confident to support them to use it.

Reflection questions

- How have you consulted with students, parents/primary caregivers and other professionals regarding students' preferred communication?
- How have you considered both the students' strengths and needs in regard to communication?
- How have you developed strategies to support students' receptive, expressive and pragmatic communication, including the use of AAC devices where relevant?

Further reading

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Acknowledgements

This practice guide was made possible by the Australian Government Department of Education through the Engaged Classrooms Through Effective Classroom Management Program. AERO would like to acknowledge the contributions of MultiLit and the Institute of Special Educators in developing and reviewing content for this guide. We would also like to thank Sarah Pillar from The Kids Research Institute Australia and Dr Tim McDonald, as well as the academics, allied health professionals, education systems' disability and inclusion teams, parents and carers, teachers and school leaders, who reviewed and provided feedback on this guide.