What is spoken language?

“Spoken language” is commonly understood as what a student says. Teachers are alert to how well students talk and listen in class.

However, there is a deeper meaning of language, which focuses on the processing of language rather than the ‘output’ of language. This meaning of language is the complex underlying symbolic system that humans use to make meaning: that is, how we make sense of the world.

So it is possible to talk about an underlying capacity for language.

A student’s spoken language skills provide the best indication of this underlying capacity for language. Language skills also involve opportunity, motivation, interest and purpose.

Importance of language

Language is important in the development of self concept, development of a concept of self as a learner, self monitoring, ... demonstrating learning. Therefore language is a key to all learning. Teachers can gain a good insight into students’ underlying language ability through looking at their spoken language skills.

Myths about students and spoken language

Myth 1: Children have completed their spoken language development by the time they go to school.
Fact: While most children have developed basic language skills prior to starting school, some experience delays in this area. All children continue to develop and refine their spoken language throughout their schooling, with critical developments at around 8 years and 12 years of age.

Myth 2: Language is only really pertinent to the English key learning area.
Fact: Language plays a major role in all subject areas and all types of participation in class.

Myth 3: Students with adequate ‘social’ language will also have adequate language for school learning.
Fact: Children who are able to manage in familiar social situations can nevertheless have specific special needs in higher level language skills needed for academic learning.

Myth 4: Students who cannot speak do not need to develop their language skills.
Fact: Students who use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) systems also develop their underlying language skills through communication and learning opportunities. These students have the same needs to develop their language as other students.

Links with written language

There are links and differences between spoken and written language. In the early years of school, spoken language drives written language. Over time, a reciprocal relationship develops, as some language forms (eg. persuasive texts) are experienced initially in written form, but then influence spoken language.

Both written and spoken language tap into the underlying capacity for language. However, written language work does not target the same skills as specific spoken language programs. Classroom programs that maintain a focus on both spoken and written language will serve students well.

Spoken language and curriculum

Spoken language is important for:
- Imparting knowledge, skills and benefits: how curriculum is taught
- Acquiring knowledge, skills and benefits: how curriculum is learned, and how students synthesise new and existing learning
- Demonstrating knowledge, skills and benefits: how learning outcomes are demonstrated.
Implications of special needs in spoken language
Students demonstrate their underlying language capacity through how well they understand and express themselves. If students have special needs in language, they may experience difficulties with socialising, self-concept, behaviour, participating in the classroom, learning literacy and learning in all areas.

Approximately 14% of students have special needs in communicating, many of these related to their underlying language capacity. Teachers can accommodate these children through:

- Maintaining a focus on spoken language as part of the class program
- Modifying their own level, style and pace of spoken language to suit the student’s understanding. This requires skills in reflection, and working with supportive co-workers to increase self-awareness
- Critically evaluating all activities for their language content
- Providing additional time and support to students with special needs in communication
- Contacting a speech-language pathologist.

What to look out for
Special needs in language can be disguised by students as they try to cope with their difficulties in understanding and expressing themselves.

Be alert to the fact that misbehaviour, lack of attention and participation, and aggression could actually be the result of special needs in language.

Due to specific problems in their underlying language ability, some students experience difficulty in learning to read, both in learning to decode text and making meaning of texts. Often these students ‘don’t like’ reading and may act up during tasks that demonstrate their difficulties.

Another area of particular concern is a discrepancy between students’ language for social communication and their ability to use and understand the more complex language needed for academic learning. These children seem bright, but do not make the expected progress in class.

Where to go for more information
Speech–Language Pathologists (SLPs) can provide advice on supporting students with special needs in spoken language. Contact the local SLP through your school.

Spoken Language: a key to life long learning

Spoken language gives an insight into students’ underlying language capacity: the ability to use the complex symbolic system to make sense of the world. Spoken language is thus inextricably linked with all learning.