

# Teaching Students with Disabilities: Speech and Language Impairments <sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

School-based agricultural education teachers must address the needs of all students enrolled in their programs. Modifications and/or accommodations are required by law for students with disabilities to ensure student success within the agricultural education program. Agriculture teachers may encounter students who have speech or language impairments in their programs. This document describes the nature of speech and language impairments, provides application tools for the learning environment, and discusses teaching strategies that can be used in different settings in the agricultural program.

## Description of Disability

Communication disorders that adversely affect a child's education performance are described as speech or language impairments (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 2007). The Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities (2013) identified three types of speech impairments as well as five types of language impairments. Speech impairments include articulation disorders, voice disorders, and fluency disorders. Articulation disorders are the mispronunciation of words through omissions, substitutions, and/or distortions. Voice disorders include abnormal production of vocal sounds (loudness, pitch, duration) or vocal quality. Fluency disorders describe speech impairments that result in unnatural rhythm and speech timing,

such as stuttering. The five categories of language disorders are

1. Morphological—difficulties in understanding structural changes in words, such as word tense,
2. Phonological—difficulties in organizing speech patterns and sound contrast,
3. Pragmatic—difficulties understanding the meaning of words and using proper language in social contexts,
4. Syntactic—difficulties in understanding and using correct grammar,
5. Semantic—difficulties understanding word meaning and vocabulary development.

There can be many causes of speech or language impairments. Communication disorders can be caused by developmental delays, physical disorders, or can occur as a result of hearing malfunctions. Most students who have a speech or language impairment that adversely affects their education performance will have a speech-language pathologist. If the student does have a speech-language pathologist, make sure to seek recommendations from that individual as well as from members of the school's special education team to determine appropriate modifications and adaptations to use for the student. The individual's specific speech or

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language impairment should be examined before attempting to make modifications to the learning environment.

## Application in the Learning Environment

Individual education plans (IEPs) are designed to improve the student's effective oral communication in the classroom with the goal of transferring such skills beyond high school. Therefore, it is imperative that each student's IEP be examined while also discussing with the student's IEP team the specific communication techniques and instructional practices to be used with the student. By understanding the short-term and long-term communication and educational goals of the student, the teacher is better able to aid the student in reaching their learning goals. Short-term goals may provide opportunities to provide immediate feedback and corrective measures. Furthermore, by addressing the student's goals, student progress is better positioned to be examined and evaluated.

Although the severity of speech and language impairments vary a great deal, and each student should be examined on a case-by-case basis, there are several general strategies that can be used in the learning environment. The teacher needs to be an active listener when the student is speaking to best interpret what is being said. If it is difficult for the instructor to understand what the student is saying, he or she should repeat back to the student what was said and look for verbal or non-verbal cues in order to make sure the student was heard correctly. The teacher should not ignore the student or pretend that the student was heard. The teacher should be extremely patient with the student and should not rush the student during speaking. While it may be tempting for the instructor to "finish" the student's thoughts, the student should completely finish his or her speech before the listener responds.

The learning environment needs to be a place where all individuals feel comfortable and safe. The teacher should encourage all students in the classroom to accept students who have speech or language impairments. Opportunities to participate in classroom discussion should be provided to students with speech or language impairments as often as other students in the classroom. If the student is anxious about participating in a discussion, the teacher should provide opportunities for the student to practice what he or she will say ahead of time to reduce the anxiety.

## CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Students with speech or language impairments should be given preferential seating within the classroom. The student should be positioned in an area close to where instruction

is given or where the student can be assisted. The instructor should frequently monitor the student's understanding of classroom material. In order to encourage independence, always ask the student if he or she needs help before assuming so. Independence can also be supported by providing praise to the student when he or she completes a task independently, especially if the task was completed through effective communication.

It is not uncommon for students who have speech or language impairments to struggle with new vocabulary. The student should be provided with additional help in vocabulary retention. The student can make flashcards or use other vocabulary building strategies, such as chunking, to learn new material. The student should be encouraged to use the existing vocabulary that he or she already knows in addition to new vocabulary to help with knowledge transfer and retention. The amount or difficulty of new vocabulary may be modified to best fit the needs of the learner. Other modifications, such as having the student provide written work instead of verbal communication may be used if appropriate to do so. However, teachers should be cautious in eliminating verbal communication assessments because it should be the goal of the learner to become more comfortable and efficient in verbal communication. The instructor should make sure that any modifications of assessments or activities do not undermine the learning objectives of the lesson or the ability to evaluate whether the learning objectives were achieved.

## LABORATORY ENVIRONMENT

The laboratory environment provides great opportunities for students to work in small groups or with a lab partner. Place the student who has a speech or language impairment in a lab group in which his or her partner(s) will be supportive and inclusive. The student's lab partner can model word pronunciation, assist the student with unclear word meanings, and provide feedback on completed work. Peer tutoring can also provide support with difficult vocabulary and text comprehension.

## NON-FORMAL ENVIRONMENT

The non-formal environment, such as field-trips, allows students with speech or language impairments to practice communication goals in settings outside of the typical school setting. These experiences provide the student with communication opportunities that will be similar in nature to the "real-world" and will help the student in the transition from school to adult life. The teacher should talk with the student ahead of time to ease anxiety so the student will know what to expect. Likewise, it is important that the

teacher talks ahead of time with the personnel the students will be visiting in order for them to expect the student with the speech or language impairment. Lastly, opportunities need to be provided for the student to communicate with adults or other students in which they would typically not interact with.

Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities. (2013). Speech or Language Impairments. Retrieved from <http://www.projectidealonline.org/v/speech-language-impairments/>

## Conclusion

Students with speech and language impairments face specific challenges within the education system. Teachers need to be able to provide the necessary support students need to overcome such challenges. Although there are many techniques teachers can use that benefit all students with communication disabilities, each specific disability may require unique support. The first step is to identify the specific speech or language disability of the student. Teachers should work with the student and members of the student's support group to modify the learning environment and provide necessary modifications. In agricultural education, the classroom environment, laboratory environment, and non-formal environment should be analyzed to ensure that students with disabilities have the necessary accommodations to be successful. For further resources on working with students with speech or language impairments see the following web links below.

<http://www.education.udel.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/LanguageDisorders.pdf>

<http://www.asha.org/public/speech/development/schoolsFAQ/>

## References

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