



Word-Finding Difficulties and Strategies

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Sometimes a student with language-based learning disabilities feels that the word is on the tip of his/her tongue, but they just can't get it out. They may snap their fingers, massage their forehead, tap on the table, gesticulate wildly, all in an attempt to get the word to come out.

Other times, students may feel they know the word but each time they try to say it, it comes out wrong. For example, the student is trying to recall the word "principal" but keeps saying "precipice" or "princess."

For a student with a language-based learning disability, word-finding difficulties cross all domains of language, and as a result, affect learning in varied ways.

Typical Word-Finding Errors

Word Level

- cannot recall single words (especially in confrontation naming tasks where there is a visual prompt, or a person is in front of you)
- can usually get your meaning across despite not knowing a word

Sentence Level

- oral formation is negatively effected (the more difficult it is to retrieve words fast and accurately, the more impaired speech will be)
- hard to follow what someone is saying if they are using empty, repetitive speech, fillers, or phrasal substitutions

Discourse Level

- building on the other levels, it is often very hard to keep up with the pace of typical conversations
- the less you are able to participate in typical conversations, the less opportunity you will have to develop and hone social language skills

What can be done?

Below is a list of various strategies you can try in the classroom and at home to help students find the right word.

In the Classroom

- always provide a word-box
- provide visual anchors (pictures or words on board)
- utilize graphic organizers
- play language-games (Taboo, Scattegories, Password, Outburst, Catch Phrase)
- learn language across domains (semantics, morphology, phonology, syntax, pragmatics)
- encourage writing as a way to jog memory
- teach connections explicitly- do not expect incidental learning
- teach students why they are doing what they are doing
- ask the student to tell you what they are thinking when they try to recall a word
- provide ideas for generalization across curriculum and life in general (i.e., encourage self-cueing)

At home and in the Classroom

- give phonemic cues
 - “s” for Sunday
 - “sun” for Sunday
 - “sounds like Monday”
- give semantic cues
 - antonyms- “it isn’t hot today, it is very _____”
 - synonyms- “you could say freezing, frosty, frigid”
 - situational- “when I am shivering outside I think of this word”
 - associations- “ice cream, snow”
 - category- “this is a temperature word”
 - morpho-syntactic- “this is an adjective, it is a one syllable word”
 - cloze sentence- “please put on your hat and coat because it is very _____”
 - serial cueing- “January, February, March, _____”
- encourage visualization
- encourage visual/morphological awareness (is it a long word, or a short word?)
- provide the first letter and tap out the number of syllables
- encourage gestures
- give a choice between two things
- encourage self-cueing
 - “give me the opposite and I’ll help you”
 - “what does it start with”
 - “where have you seen it before?”
 - “tell me what it looks like”
 - “try writing it down”

References

1. German, D.J., (1994) Word-finding difficulties in children and adolescents. In Wallach, G., Butler, K. (Eds.), *Language Learning Disabilities in School-age Children and Adolescents: Some Principles and Applications* (pp. 323-348). New York: Macmillan College Publishing Co., Inc.
2. German, D.J., (2001) *It's on the Tip of My Tongue*. Chicago: Word Finding Materials, Inc.