The Neurodivergent Classroom

Developmental language disorder (DLD) at a Glance



DLD means lasting difficulties with language that get in the way of daily life or progress at school. It can affect vocabulary, sentence structure, understanding, or several areas at once.

What you may notice in class

- They follow spoken instructions only partway.
- Spoken language is hard to follow.
- What they say doesn't come out the way they meant it.
- Social rules of conversation are tricky.
- Retelling a story, they lose track.
- They use subject terms but can't quite explain them.
- Their struggles get mistaken for inattention.
- With younger kids, short answers and trouble following in class stand out. (elementary school)
- Older students find academic language, reading comprehension and complex discussions especially hard. (middle and high school)

Strengths

- Can show what they know in writing or visually.
- Joins in more easily with familiar words and clear structure.
- Can show subject knowledge in different ways.
- Can tell you which kinds of tasks work for them.
- Knows more than their spoken words can show.

What helps

- Give instructions in short, visible steps.
- Say one thing per sentence, then pause.
- Check understanding with an open question.
- Write key words down and explain them.
- Add pictures to key information.
- Let them answer by speaking, pointing or writing.
- Teach subject vocabulary as a goal in its own right.
- Give thinking time before a discussion.
- Look at what the task demands instead of guessing at causes.
- With younger kids, use pictures, gestures and short sentence frames. (elementary school)
- With older students, explain key terms in writing and structure discussions. (middle and high school)

What tends not to help

- Measuring knowledge through only one form of expression.
- Guessing at a cause and saying it out loud in class.
- Treating therapy guidelines as teaching instructions.
- Generic checklists that promise results.

Words that carry

"I'll show you the task one step at a time."

"You can show, write or say what you know."

"There's no rush. Take your time to answer."

"You can show, draw or say the word." (elementary school)

"What does this word mean? Let's use it in a sentence." (middle and high school)

Where to find support

RADLD radld.org
International campaign raising awareness of DLD, with resources for schools.

NIDCD: Developmental language disorder nidcd.nih.gov/health/developmental-language-disorder
US National Institutes of Health, plain-language overview.

RCSLT: DLD information for school staff
rcslt.org/-/media/Project/RCSLT/developmental-language-disorder-dld-info-school-staff.pdf
UK Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists.

Local support
A speech-language pathologist (speech and language therapist) in your country can evaluate and advise. Ask your school's special education team.

More in the Teacher Portal: neurodivergentclassroom.com/teacher-portal/language-disorder/

Sources: Bishop et al.: Phase 2 of CATALISE, Delphi consensus · WHO: Clinical descriptions and diagnostic requirements for ICD-11 · ASHA: Spoken Language Disorders, Practice Portal · AWMF: S3 guideline on therapy for developmental language disorders (in German) · Department for Education: SEND Code of Practice