

How do we support key stage 4 pupils to reach their potential in examinations?

Young people with SLI (specific language impairment) have to sit exams in order to succeed in the academic system, but the exam process poses inherent challenges for pupils with language difficulties. There seems to be a degree of inevitability that persistent language difficulties *will* impact on educational outcomes unless adequate support is in place. The recent research in this area has shown that young people with specific language impairment (SLI) often have difficulties with academic achievement in adolescence (Durkin, Simkin, Knox and Conti-Ramsden, 2009). How best can these young people be supported so that their language difficulties do not pose significant barriers to their academic achievement with regards to examinations?

Access arrangements (Joint Council for Qualifications, JCQ, 2006) are one such provision in place for helping pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) to reach their potential in exams. The development of such arrangements have been underpinned by the legal framework of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (HMSO, 2001) which specifies that schools and authorities are required to make reasonable adjustments to prevent pupils with SEN from being placed at a disadvantage (Woods, 2010) when undertaking compulsory examinations.

Access arrangements are described by the JCQ (2010) as arrangements made before the examination based on students needs. This may include a reader, scribe, extra time, rest breaks, a prompter and a new arrangement launched in 2007, the 'Oral Language Modifier' (OLM). The OLM is can modify the carrier language of an examination question which would normally pose problems for pupils with SLI. The OLM must follow strict rules and is unable to explain any subject specific terms (e.g. the maths terms decimal, mode and fraction). In summary, access arrangements allow pupils with special

educational needs 'an even playing field' on which to access the examinations.

Access arrangements at Upper House & Post 16

All pupils will be assessed for eligibility for the full range of access arrangements at the end of year 9 in advance of their examinations (GCSE/ELC/OCR). Pupils are made aware of the help they can have and are trained in how to use it to their best advantage in Years 10 and 11. The access arrangements available are:

Access arrangement	Description
Oral Language Modifier	Adult who may rephrase the exam question or change words to help pupils understand (following strict guidelines).
Reader	An adult who may read the questions or pupil's work to them.
Scribe (person)	An adult who may write pupil's dictated answers to questions
Scribe (computer)	A computer with spell check and/or predictive text is permitted.
Word processor	A computer with spell check and/or predictive text disabled.
Transcript	A transcript is a copy of the pupil's script made after the examination which may be made legible for the examiner to read.
Extra time up to 25%	Permitted percentage of time added onto the end of an exam
Supervised rest breaks	A supervised movement break of a few minutes to help pupil's concentration. The time taken is <u>not</u> deducted from the exam.
Read Aloud	Some pupils may benefit from reading their work aloud. If they are particularly loud they may need to do the exam in a separate room.

Until the introduction of the *Oral Language Modifier*, (CIEA, 2008) no access arrangement had directly addressed the needs of children with SLI specifically. Despite their entitlement to this provision, many young people with SLI are not currently receiving it (Woods 2010). Furthermore, to date, no research had been undertaken to demonstrate the effectiveness of this access arrangement for pupils with SLI. This gap in the evidence base has led to the need for further research into the use of the OLM and this research was undertaken by two Blossom House employees, Gemma Chapple, SpLD Coordinator and Frances O'Garro, Speech and Language Therapist. The findings of this research project is summarised in the abstract below.

Title: The effectiveness of an 'Oral Language Modifier' in enhancing examination performance for adolescents with SLI.

ABSTRACT:

Background: Studies have shown that young people with a history of Specific Language Impairment (SLI) are at risk of underachievement in secondary school assessments. Research is therefore required to examine what support is needed to help these adolescents reach their potential. One such provision in place is the 'Oral Language Modifier' access arrangement. Currently there is no empirical evidence base for the effectiveness of this in supporting pupils with SLI to reach their potential in examinations.

Aims: The aims of this investigation were to explore the extent to which the use of an OLM can improve pupils' performance in GCSE mathematics examinations. It also sought to investigate the impact of subject specific terminology difficulties upon mathematics exam performance. In addition, the research looked at the most

problematic language structures in exam questions for pupils with SLI.

Methods and Procedures: An RCT N=1 has been carried out on a cohort of 10 key stage 4 pupils with primary SLCN. Participants' performance during six treatment conditions (baseline, no help, basic treatment x 2, intensive treatment x 2) were compared. Paired samples t-tests examined the effect of treatment on test scores to ascertain which of the treatments had the greatest effect in improving exam performance.

Outcomes and Results: The participants performed better when they had received OLM training when compared to the baseline treatment where no OLM input was given. Intensive OLM training was found to be better than basic training. Seven participants experienced particular difficulties following instructions containing specific mathematics terms.

Conclusions: The participants were found to perform significantly better when given access to an OLM. However, the OLM was not able to address all language issues experienced such as particular difficulties with subject specific terminology. Certain language structures within examination questions in particular proved to be more problematic for this group than others.

This research strongly implies that more support is needed for pupils with SLI within their educational settings prior to the exam room context to target the sub-skills required to reach their full potential in exams. Sadly, many schools are unaware of the level of support that could and should be made available to pupils with SLI when completing examinations.

**Gemma Chapple & Frances O'Garro,
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