



## Language and attentional difficulties

Language, attention, and working memory are important cognitive processes we all use everyday.

We use our **language skills** to understand what others say, to comprehend what we read (like this Explainer!), to say or write messages to others, to interact socially, and more. We use our **attention skills** to focus on the right information at the right time, to block out distractions, to stay alert and focused, and to make decisions. Our language and attention systems work with our **working memory**, the mental notepad we use to keep information front of mind while we process and use it.

Often, we use these skills with ease and don't stop to think about how they work, or how important they are.

However, some neurodevelopmental disorders impact language and attention. In fact, the two most common neurodevelopmental disorders of childhood are Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Together, DLD and ADHD impact around four students in every classroom.

Other students might also have language and/or attentional difficulties, including those on the autism spectrum, students with hearing impairment, and students with literacy disorders.

*Language difficulties* affect how students use, remember, and learn new words and sentence structures, and can make it hard to use language for different purpose (like verbally retelling a story versus writing an essay). They impact all language modes: speaking, listening, reading and writing, as well as social skills.

Language difficulties can happen whether you speak only one language or are multi-lingual.

*Attention difficulties* are to do with issues with executive functioning, which are the processes that happen in the 'control centre' of the brain. Difficulties with executive function can make it difficult to concentrate, control impulses, and persevere with tasks.

### Indicators of possible language and/or attentional difficulties

- difficulty learning to read, followed by avoidance of reading
- difficulty with writing, such as mistakes with explaining what happened and when
- difficulty remembering or following instructions or directions
- using the same words over and over, and difficulty learning or using new or complex words
- using word substitutes that sound similar but do not have the same meaning, such as "efficient" rather than "sufficient"
- difficulty distinguishing important from unimportant information
- difficulty focusing or starting tasks

In my doctoral research, I asked students with language and/or attentional difficulties what they wished teachers knew about them and how they learn. Here are some things students said teachers can do:

- "... it just takes time to understand. Like, maybe like, give me like, more time maybe?"
- "I always need a double check on what they said, because I really wanted to be clear. And sometimes I just don't hear it properly, so I think, just double checking."
- "...like the teacher, like, explaining what to do and then showing you how to do [it] and stuff like that. Not, not just telling you, 'Read the textbook, do that, do that'".



This C4IE Explainer was written by Haley Tancredi. Haley is a certified practicing speech pathologist who has worked in education since the early 2000s. She is currently in the final year of her PhD research as part of the [Accessible Assessment ARC Linkage project](#) investigating the impact of reducing instructional language complexity and cognitive load on students' engagement, comprehension, and academic outcomes.