

Reception baseline assessment case study

Using the CEM *BASE* assessment with children with speech, language and communication needs (SCLN)

Description of 'The Child'

The subject of this case study is a 5 year old boy with a diagnosis of specific language impairment (SLI) which means he has difficulties with the understanding and use of language, but his non-verbal skills are a relative strength. The child also has a phonological disorder with features of verbal dyspraxia which means he makes speech sound (pronunciation) errors. These errors severely impact on his ability to make himself understood. He has a statement of special educational needs and has been placed in the school in order to access the specialist language resource. The child has recently joined the setting from another mainstream school (without specialist provision). This child was selected as the teacher is still becoming familiar with the child's use of language, his speech sound production and strengths and areas of need. Since the baseline assessment will be conducted whilst the children are beginning at school, it is likely that the teachers assessing children with SCLN, particularly phonological disorders, will not be familiar with the children's speech.

The Setting

The Child is currently in Reception in a mainstream school which has an additionally resourced provision for children who require intensive speech and language support and specialist staff. The assessment was carried out by the teacher who works in the language resource.

The assessment

The assessment took place in the language resource room. This room is a quiet space that the child knows well. It is here that the majority of his speech and language therapy and specialist teaching takes place. The teacher sat next to the child so that they were both facing the laptop. This seating arrangement worked well. The child and the teacher sat with their backs to the door to minimise distractions. There is a window in the room which faces the playground so the teacher ensured the assessment was carried out when there were no children using the space outside the window. The child, who has been at the setting for about 3 weeks, is becoming used to working in the room, so appeared comfortable and at ease. He was excited to be working on the laptop. The assessment was completed in 2 separate sessions to ensure the child was not overwhelmed by the tasks he was being asked to perform.

Successes / Challenges

There were several challenges to overcome when completing the assessment. The child needed support at the beginning of the assessment as he adjusted to having to listen to an unfamiliar voice that didn't have a face. The teacher needed to repeat some of the instructions; the child responded well to this, it helped him to see the non-verbal communication to support his understanding of what he was being asked to do. The teacher also used some key word signing.

The story section of the assessment was particularly challenging for the child and the assessor. The child found it difficult to follow the story on the screen and became distracted by the picture. The questions asking to point at a word, then a letter of the alphabet were too abstract for the child to complete. Later on in the assessment he was able to read some of the words presented to him and he was also able to name several letters of the alphabet/sounds.

During the Mr Tiny story part of the assessment asks the child to repeat the names of the animals. It was unclear whether the child's attempt at the pronunciation, which although was wrong, used the child's typical substitutions e.g. 'l' for 'r'. This was also a challenge during the reading section of the assessment. Whilst not pronounced clearly, the child was able to read some words. The assessor marked the words that were read, even when

substitutions were made since this was the child's typical speech pattern. Because the teacher is still becoming used to the child's speech, some words may not have been marked correctly since they were not understood. Asking for clarification and/or repeating the word back to the child may be useful, although this was done a few times in the assessment, it was unclear whether the child was simply agreeing with the teacher because he knew she was reading the word, rather than clarifying what he had actually said. It was unclear what was being assessed during the "can you say Zop?" section of the assessment. If the accuracy of producing phonemes was being assessed then children with SLI would more than likely not get any 'right'. If the children are expected to roughly repeat back the words, or copy the syllabic pattern then they would be more able to get some of them 'right'. The number and counting (ladybird) section was particularly successful. The child was keen to answer the questions even before the audio had finished, showing, as typical with SLI, he has abilities in line with other children his age in non-verbal skills such as counting. Whilst his pronunciation of some numbers was incorrect, the teacher was still able to understand the answer given. The child also offered fingers as he said his answer to support the number. He struggled when answering the positional questions (point to the ladybird at the top). Key word signing may support this series of questions.

Impact of the child's SLCN

The child's SLCN did have an impact on the assessment. The assessor used specific skills e.g. key word signing, understanding of the child's speech sound substitutions in order to make a professional judgement on the answers the child provided. It was important to have had access to the child's speech and language therapy records (e.g. reports, advice gathered during statutory assessment). The speech and language therapist who works with the child was also consulted for parts of the assessment in order to clarify and gain a professional opinion in regard to some specific aspects of the child's speech.

Next steps/repeating the assessment

I would recommend, if possible, having 2 assessors to support the assessment of children who have specific language impairment, particularly those who have phonological disorders meaning their speech is hard to understand. Being able to have a professional dialogue with the speech and language therapist was invaluable during the assessment process. In order to be more successful, the teacher carrying out the assessment must have separate guidance in order to clarify what the assessment is actually trying to assess e.g. is a phoneme an acceptable answer when the child is asked to say the letter name – names of the letters of the alphabet are taught in phase 3 of Letters and Sounds, whilst initial phonemes are taught in phase 2. It is more likely that the child will be able to name the sound of the letter at the beginning of the reception year (with the exception, perhaps, of the letters in their name). It would be useful to use speakers during the assessment; the volume on the laptop used was quite low, despite being on the highest setting. It is also important to keep in mind the amount of time this assessment will take per child. In my setting I carried the assessment out on several children with SLCN and on average each assessment took 30 minutes. Timetabling would need to be thought through carefully to ensure that all children were given the same amount of time and attention during the assessment. I would also recommend the same member of staff completing the assessment for all children to ensure a consistent approach. I observed a colleague carry out the assessment on a child with autism and some of the answers she accepted from the child were different to the answer I would have recorded, without guidelines this type of inconsistency may affect the outcome of the baseline. It would also be useful, to include in the guidelines, the types of prompts that are useful for each section e.g. if a child is having trouble understanding what they are being asked to do, try using a key word sign (which could even be included for non-specialist staff) or reword the question using less language or in a different word order.

- Assistant Head for Inclusion