Word Finding Difficulties

Word finding difficulties, also known as word retrieval problems, refer to the temporary inability to access and retrieve a previously used and understood words from your memory. Commonly, this may be referred to as the *tip of the tongue* phenomenon, where the word is known but is unable to be recalled, hence the saying “it’s on the tip of my tongue”.

**Keywords:** word finding difficulty, word retrieval, semantics, tip of the tongue

Words and their meanings are stored and organised in the semantic (vocabulary) system. Students with word finding difficulties (WFDs) often have difficulties storing and/or retrieving words from their semantic system. The semantic system can be thought of like a filing cabinet. A well organised semantic system (like a filing cabinet) assists easy retrieval of a desired word. A messy filing cabinet (a disorganised semantic system) makes it difficult to retrieve the target word.

Approximately 25% of students with language disorder present with WFDs. WFDs can also present in students with reading and writing difficulties. In the classroom, WFDs have been shown to impede learning. For example, students with WFDs often have difficulty demonstrating use of new and existing vocabulary. Many students with WFD also have underlying vocabulary difficulties which may further impact academic performance.

**Signs of Word Finding Difficulties**

Students with word finding difficulties may exhibit the following:

- Overuse of fillers during speech (e.g. “um”)
- Repetitions in speech (e.g. “I went, I went, I went to the shop”)
- Circumlocutions (talking around the word, e.g. [soap] “you wash with it”)
- Use of vague/non-specific words (e.g. “stuff”, “thing”)
- Substitutions for words in the same/similar category (e.g. [hammer] “tool”)
- Delays/hesitations in responding (due to increased time required to find the word)

Students may become easily frustrated if they are unable to find their desired word.
Strategies to Support Students with Word Finding Difficulties

- Phonemic cueing: provide the student with the first letter of the target word (e.g. [tornado] “it starts with the /t/ sound”)
- Semantic cueing: provide the student with prompts relating to the category/function of the target word (e.g. “it’s a type of food that we cook in the oven”)
- Use cloze tasks (e.g. “I rode on the ____ to get to school today”)
- Use synonyms (e.g. “excited is another word for ....”)
- Use patterns (e.g. “January, February, March ....”)
- Provide ‘fill in the blank’ or multiple-choice options in the classroom
- Teach metalinguistic strategies and how to apply these skills (e.g. exploration of syllable structure to reinforce the sound structure of words)
- Use opposites (e.g. “the opposite of on is ....”)
- Encourage students to visualise their target word or phrase (e.g. make a mental picture)

Activities to Support Semantic Development and Word Retrieval

- Categorisation activities such as sorting and naming (convergent and divergent)
- Discussing words and word meanings (e.g. when reading a book about animals, discuss the specific terminology for their young – cows have calves, geese have goslings, bears have cubs, etc. Discuss the meaning of new vocabulary that is discovered).
- Give a definition and see if the student can name the word you are defining (e.g. Adult: “What is something we use to brush our teeth?” Student: “A toothbrush.”)
- Odd-one-out sorting games
- Use of mind maps (or similar) to visually represent semantic links

Summary

- Word finding difficulties refer to the inability to retrieve a word from one’s memory bank
- Word finding difficulties may be frustrating and distressing for students
- Word finding difficulties can impact day-to-day communication, which may result in embarrassment, low self-esteem, social isolation and poor academic success
- If you suspect a student has word finding difficulties, speak to your schools’ speech pathologist
Want to learn more?

To learn more about Language Disorder and how to support children and young people for whom language is their primary disorder, please contact Speech and Language Development Australia (SALDA). SALDA provides holistic, innovative and effective therapy, education and support services and has a transdisciplinary team of speech pathologists, occupational therapists, educators, psychologists and physiotherapists.

Contact: 1300 881 763 or hello@salda.org.au
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References


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