



How using the Blank Levels of Understanding framework benefits children's language development in early years settings.

Written by Kate Hemingway, Speech and Language Therapist

Introduction

Understanding spoken language includes interpreting the meaning of words, sentences and grammatical concepts. As Speech and Language Therapists one of our main tasks is to assess children's receptive language skills.

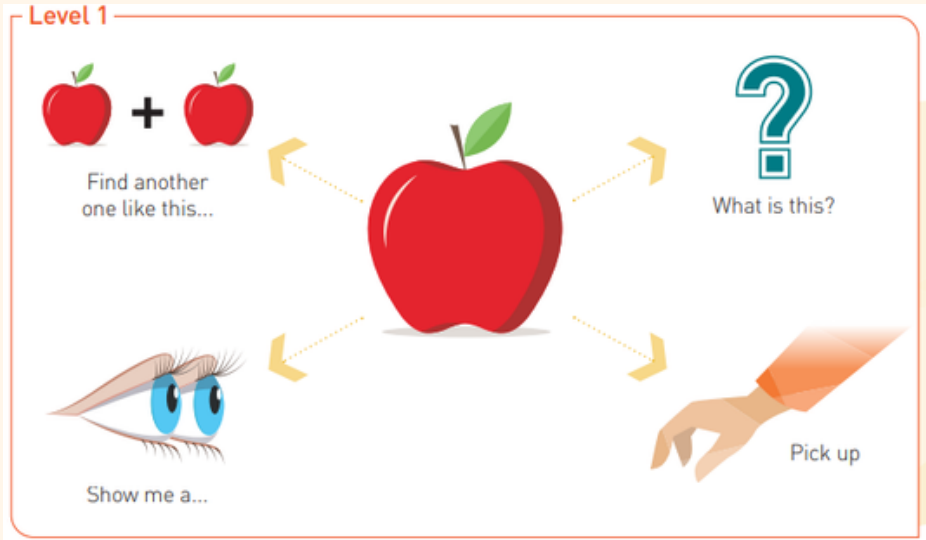
There are many ways in which this is achieved, including using formal assessment, completing observations of the child in their setting or at home, talking to parents and teachers and using informal assessment. One of the frameworks that Speech and Language Therapists often use is Blank Levels of Questioning. This model was developed by Dr. Marion Blank in the late 1970s to show how children move from answering very direct questions to understanding more abstract questions. Despite being nearly 50 years old, Blank Levels are an essential part of a Speech and Language Therapist's toolkit, for many reasons! One is that it supports the people around the child to restructure and simplify questions, so the child can understand and develop their language skills. Another benefit is that Blank Level questions can be used every day, in all situations.

The different levels

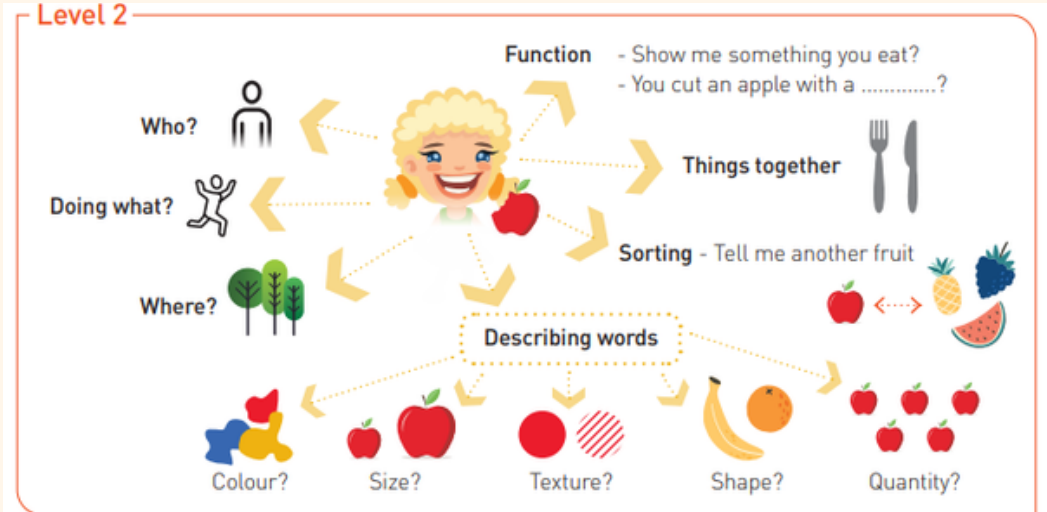
Marion Blank believed that as children develop their language skills, so does their ability to think, reason and problem-solve. Blank highlighted the importance of asking children questions that required them to think critically and use language in sophisticated ways. Blank developed 4 areas of understanding, moving from concrete to more difficult abstract questions.

The levels have complicated names but when you see the examples they are easy to understand!

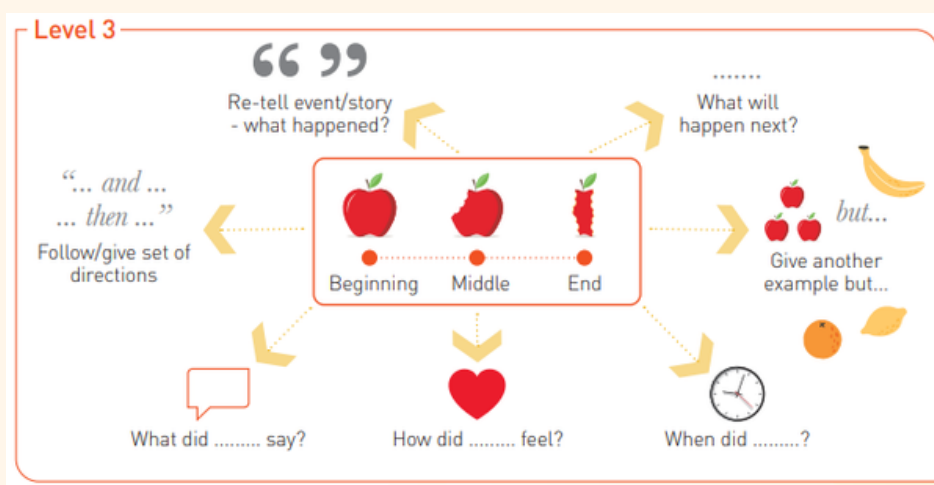
Blank Level one – Matching perception – This is the simplest level, where questions are concrete and relate to what is right in front of a child. This level is about basic recognition and naming the things a child can see, hear, or touch directly. Questions might include “What is this?” whilst you are pointing to an apple, or “Find the ball.” Blank Level 1 questions are typically aimed at children aged 2–3 years old.



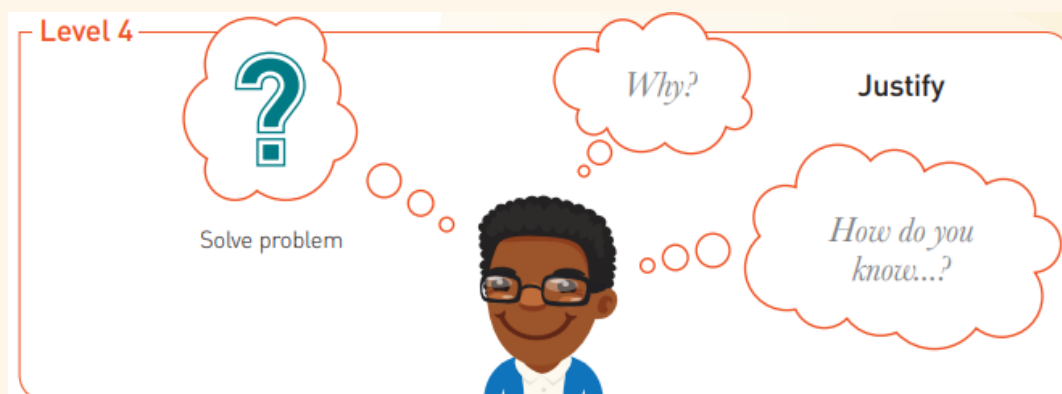
Blank Level 2– Selection analysis of perception– At this level, the child is required to not only recognise objects but also describe something about them. Blank Level 2 questions require a child to focus on specific details and functions of an object. Questions might include “Point to the red slide”, “Where is the big table” and “What is happening in the picture?” Children aged 2–3 years will be developing these skills.



Blank Level 3 – Reordering perception – Questions at Blank Level 3 push the child to think beyond the obvious, recognising what they see or know. It involves understanding questions about predicting and sequencing information, as well as understanding questions including negatives. Questions at this stage might include. “Who is not wearing a hat?” and “What might happen next?”. Children aged 3–4 years will be starting to understand questions at Blank level 3.



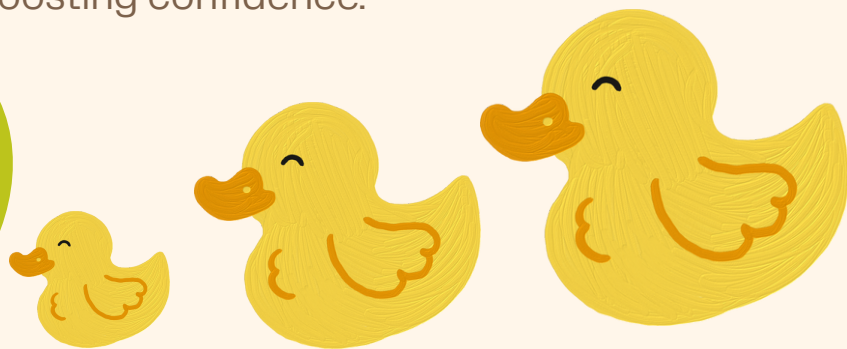
Blank Level 4 – Reasoning about perception – This level is complex and abstract, it is aimed at older children 5 years and up and requires a child to reason and justify information, as well as problem-solve. Questions at Blank Level 4 might include, “How can you tell it’s cold outside?” and “Why is the boy worried?”. Children going to school will be developing an understanding of questions at Blank level 4.



The benefits of using Blank Levels of questioning in nurseries and preschools

Using Blank Levels of Questioning in early years settings, offers a structured approach to support children's receptive (understanding) and expressive (speaking) language development, by aligning questions with the child's cognitive and linguistic stage. Blank Levels allows teachers to scaffold children's language and support the development of language step-by-step, ensuring children build foundational skills, such as vocabulary and basic sentence formation before tackling abstract reasoning, creating a smooth developmental trajectory. The model also acts as a diagnostic and instrumental tool, helping teachers pinpoint a child's level and tailor interactions accordingly. The differentiation between the different levels ensures that children's language and communication needs are supported, reducing frustration and boosting confidence.

Practical ways of using Blank Levels of Questioning within your setting



Be aware of children's levels of understanding and think of questions at each level to support children to move onto the next stage. For example.....

Questions in the water area:

Level 1 – Where's the duck?

Level 2 – Can you find me the big jug?

Level 3 – Ethan's pouring the water, what will he do next?

Level 4 – My cup is full but there's still water left, what should I do?

Ask children questions at their current stage and add a few questions at the next stage. Scaffold children's answers to questions at the next stage by using visuals and prompts, breaking the questions down, and modelling answers.

How Blank Levels of Understanding supports the EEF Tool Kit.

Whilst the EEF evidence store does not reference Blank Levels of understanding, the framework supports the underlying principles. The EEF Early Years Tool Kit, highlights effective approaches to support the development of children's language and communication skills. Including, teaching and modelling vocabulary, teaching and modelling language and teaching and modelling social skills. Blank Levels of Understanding supports the EEF Evidence Store by offering a practical tool to support the development of children's language and communication skills, in early education. It bridges the gap between the Store's broad evidence themes and classroom practice. Enabling teachers to implement evidence-based strategies with precision and impact.

References and Further reading

Blank, M., Rose, S.A., & Berlin, L. J. (1978) The Language of Learning: The Preschool Years.

EEF Website:

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/early-years/toolkit/communication-and-language-approaches>

TALC (Test of Abstract Language Comprehension) assessment Elks, L, McLachlan, H., & Blank, M. (2012).

Teach Wire Website:

<https://www.teachwire.net/news/blank-levels-questioning/>

Banter Speech and Language:

<https://www.banterspeech.com.au/huh-the-many-benefits-of-using-blanks-language-levels-framework-to-help-your-kids-to-understand-language-for-school/>

About Kate..

Kate is a Speech and Language Therapist and is the co-owner of Seaside SaLT (speech and language therapy), based in Scarborough which provides speech and language therapy services along the Yorkshire Coast.

