Characteristics of Individuals with Communication Disorders

What is a communication disorder?
We say a student's language is "impaired" when it's very different from the language used by other kids their age, gender, or social/cultural background. According to Van Riper and Erickson (1996), speech is considered impaired if it stands out so much that it:

- Distracts others,
- Makes communication difficult, or
- Causes stress for the speaker or listener.

In simple terms, impaired speech is noticeable, hard to understand, and sometimes frustrating. This gives us a good idea of what to look for in students with language or speech difficulties.

Language Disorders

The type of language disorder depends on whether it's **primary** (the main issue) or **secondary** (caused by another disability).

Primary Language Disorders
Some children have trouble learning the rules of language for no clear reason. This is called a **Specific Language Impairment (SLI)**. Children with SLI may have trouble in one area of language or in several:

- **Phonology** (sounds)
- **Morphology** (word endings, tenses)
- **Syntax** (sentence structure)
- **Semantics** (meaning of words)
- **Pragmatics** (using language socially)

Secondary Language Disorders
These happen because of another underlying disability.

Common Areas of Difficulty

1. Phonology (Sounds of Language)

- **Articulation disorders**: Trouble physically producing sounds (e.g., saying "wabbit" instead of "rabbit").
- **Phonological disorders**: Trouble learning the rules of sound use (e.g., leaving out consonants at the end of words, like saying "ca" for "cat").
  Children who continue using these patterns past age 4 may need speech therapy.

2. Morphology (Word Endings & Forms)

- Kids may leave out or misuse word endings (e.g., "two mouses" instead of "two mice," or "I falled down" instead of "I fell").

3. Syntax (Sentence Structure)

- Children may keep using very simple sentences or mix up word order (e.g., "Where the truck is?" instead of "Where is the truck?").

4. Semantics (Word Meaning & Vocabulary)

- Kids may have a small vocabulary, use words incorrectly, invent new words, or struggle with abstract meanings and figurative language (e.g., thinking "someone is blue" means the person is literally colored blue).

5. Pragmatics (Using Language Socially)

- Using language socially is very important. Children need to know how to start, maintain, change, and end conversations.
- Kids with pragmatic difficulties may struggle to join conversations, understand others' perspectives, use humor, or keep a topic going.

Examples of Language Disorders

Area	Example	What Happens
Phonology	Nicholas, 6½	Leaves out final consonants: "da ca caw da mou" (The cat caught the mouse)
Morphology	Mikey, 7	Overgeneralizes rules: "He doos it all the time!"
Syntax	Mikey	Misuses sentence structure: "My mom is picking up me today"
Semantics	Melissa, 10	Trouble finding words: "They have a game…like a little circle thing…you move it across…"
Pragmatics	Leo, 7	Struggles to stay on topic: talks about jacket and Brazil when asked about his little brother

Summary:
Language and speech disorders can affect one or multiple areas of communication. Early identification and support, such as speech therapy, help children improve their skills and better participate in school and social life.