

# SLCN in key stage 3

Speech, language and communication needs can be the underpinning reason for many other problems and should be on the radar of every secondary school. In a new five-part series, **Matt Bromley** looks at how to support SLCN in key stage 3

**B**efore you picked up this article, did you know what SLCN stood for? Don't worry if not. I polled several secondary teachers before I began writing and was surprised to find that a majority hadn't heard of the acronym.

And yet SLCN is a major cause of SEN in secondary school pupils and prevents many pupils from accessing the curriculum and fulfilling their potential. So, before we go on, let's define SLCN.

## What is SLCN?

SLCN stands for speech, language and communication needs. All children and young people need good speech, language and communication skills in order to access the school curriculum, make good progress and achieve good outcomes from school and from life. After all, speech, language and communication underpin basic literacy.

But, as well as being integral to literacy and therefore academic success, speech, language and communication skills are also closely linked to pupil behaviour and to their social, emotional and mental health and wellbeing. After all, if pupils cannot communicate effectively, they cannot interact with their peers or express their feelings. Let's call this emotional literacy.

There are important differences between the three elements of SLCN. Let's deconstruct the acronym.

**S** stands for speech. Pupils need to be able to speak fluently – which is to say with a clear voice, using appropriate pitch, volume and intonation, and without too much hesitation – in order to express themselves and demonstrate their understanding in every school subject. Being able to speak enables pupils to clearly convey their learning.

**L** stands for language. Pupils need to command a range of appropriate vocabulary in order to facilitate and further their learning across the curriculum. For example, they need to understand instructions from teachers and others. Pupils also need to be able to use verbal reasoning in order to acquire, process, analyse and understand the new information they encounter every day at school.

**C** stands for communication. Pupils need to know how to adapt their communication style in order to suit the purpose and audience. They need to be able to use and follow the non-verbal rules of communication, such as active listening and taking conversational turns, and they need to be able to use language to explain, describe, persuade and so on.

## Vital for secondary schools

Language development is something generally associated with early years education. However, language and communication skills continue to develop throughout pupils' teenage years. Pupils continue learning new vocabulary and complex language structures.

It is therefore important for secondary teachers to be able to encourage and extend this development. Put simply, language and communication between teachers and pupils enables learning.

Furthermore, pupils need the ability to use language for negotiation, compromise, resolving conflict, developing relationships and for managing and regulating their emotions. And all pupils need the skills to be proficient communicators, for school, work and for life.

However, there are many pupils who struggle to develop these skills. For some pupils this may mean specialist support is needed and/or access to alternative and augmentative means of communication such as signs, symbols and communication aids.

For others, however, tailored support from within school can make a considerable difference. Without this support, pupils with SLCN will struggle to understand instructions, access the curriculum, manage their

behaviour and reach targets that could otherwise be well within their grasp. It is therefore vital that secondary school teachers understand how to support and guide pupils with SLCN.

## The policy context

It is 10 years since the term SLCN entered the popular lexicon. In 2008, John Bercow MP chaired an independent cross-party commission into the way in which children and young people with SLCN were supported. The report Bercow Review identified five key themes/problems:

- 1 Communication is crucial to children's life chances and yet awareness of its importance among the public and decision-makers is not sufficient.
- 2 Strategic system-wide approaches to supporting SLCN are rare. Very often SLCN does not feature in national or local policies.
- 3 Services are inaccessible and inequitable. Too often support for children's SLCN is planned and funded based on the available resources, rather than what is needed, leading to an unacceptable level of variation across the country.
- 4 Support that makes a difference is based on the evidence of what works. However, service design and cuts frequently do not take account of the evidence we have.
- 5 Too many children with SLCN are being missed and are not getting the vital support they need.

To address these five key themes, the commission set out 40 recommendations. Chief among them were the following:

First, the commission said that communication was critical. Everyone must understand speech, language and communication better. To achieve this aim, clear messages and information should be developed for parents and carers. This support should be recognised as essential to improving social mobility, health inequality and employment.

Second, a new cross-government strategy for children should be developed, with speech, language and communication at its core. Proposals to transform provision for children and young people's mental health should be strengthened to recognise the importance of SLCN in mental health.

Third, there should be an accessible and equitable service. Children and young people with SLCN should get the support they need, wherever they live. Local areas should be provided with data on estimated SLCN in their population. A programme of training on joint commissioning for SLCN should be funded.

Fourth, support needed to make a difference. As such, decisions about SLCN support should be made based on what we know will make the greatest impact. Government should support the development of evidence-based integrated pathways for children with SLCN. An evaluation programme for innovative models of school-based support should be funded and Ofsted training should ensure inspectors focus on SLCN.

Finally, there needed to be better early identification and intervention. It is essential that the signs of SLCN are spotted early and acted on. Understanding of speech, language and communication should be embedded in initial qualifications and CPD for all relevant practitioners.

In its response, published in December 2008, the government accepted many of the recommendations. Its subsequent action plan contained a range of initiatives to improve services for young people with SLCN and to raise awareness of the importance of speech, language and communication across the whole children's workforce. But it wasn't enough.

## Ten years on...

In March 2018, 10 years after the Bercow Review, the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists

(RCSLT) published a progress report. It argues that, as a nation, we are still to grasp the significance of SLCN and as a result, hundreds of thousands of children and their families continue to suffer needlessly.

More than 1.4 million children and young people in the UK have SLCN. Language disorders alone are one of the most common disorders in childhood, affecting nearly 10 per cent of children and young people everywhere throughout their lives. What's more, in areas of social disadvantage this number can rise to 50 per cent, including those with delayed language as well as children with identified SLCN.

Poor understanding of and insufficient resourcing for SLCN mean too many children and young people receive inadequate, ineffective and inequitable support, affecting their educational outcomes, their employability and their mental health.

The RCSLT says that, "without a shift in approach, children and young people will continue to leave school without basic language and literacy skills ... we will continue having disproportionate numbers of young people with SLCN who are not in education, employment or training, who need mental health support or who are in contact with the youth justice system ... (and) children and young people with lifelong communication needs will not get the support and adjustments they require".

In this series I will explore what more secondary schools, both school leaders and teachers, can do to support pupils with SLCN. The first action is to ensure that schools are correctly identifying pupils with SLCN.

**Most statistics suggest an average seven per cent of young people have some form of SLCN, that's two pupils in every class**

## Identification of need

Department for Education (DfE) census data from January 2018 shows that the percentage of pupils with SEN increased from 14.4 per cent in 2017 to 14.6 per cent in 2018 and that the percentage of pupils with a Statement or Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) increased from 2.8 to 2.9 per cent. A further 1,022,535 pupils were on SEN support in January 2018, this equates to 11.7 per cent of the total pupil population, an increase from 11.6 per cent in 2017.

The 2018 data shows that SLCN remains one of the most significant causes of SEN with 22.8 per cent of pupils with SEN support and 14.6 per cent of pupils with a Statement or EHCP being identified as having SLCN as their primary need.

Most statistics suggest an average seven per cent of young people have some form of SLCN, that's two pupils in every class. So why are many secondary school teachers seemingly unaware of it?

One reason, I think, is the fact that pupils' needs are often being wrongly identified and coded when they move to secondary school. This has legal implications because, according to the SEND Code of Practice (2014), schools have a statutory duty to publish information on their website about how they implement their policy for SEN (the SEN Information Report) and

this must include information on "policies for identifying children and young people with SEN and assessing their needs". If SLCN is not being correctly identified, those policies are clearly ineffective, and pupils may suffer the consequences.

The Communication Trust believes that an average of 40 per cent of children with SLCN are not being identified as such and the most difficult to spot are older pupils, particularly those who have difficulties with vocabulary (45 per cent not identified), formulating sentences (52 per cent not identified), or difficulties understanding (48 per cent not identified).

That's not to say that primary pupils are always identified correctly and supported, but a far greater proportion of pupils go unidentified or wrongly coded when they transfer to secondary school. Take, for example, that last statistic of 48 per cent. The same figure for primary schools is 29 per cent – still clearly a concern, but nowhere near as bad as in secondary.

Ofsted has reported on this problem of identification. They say that inspection evidence suggests some children and young people have been "allocated support for their behaviour when, in fact, they had specific communication needs."

The Communications Trust says that, because "SLCN is often under-identified ... it's important to think about how many pupils you might typically expect to have SLCN in your school. This way you can see if your current data suggests there could be pupils who have not been identified or who have been misidentified."

SLCN can be complex and difficult to identify, so an on-going focus on identification is absolutely imperative. If an average seven per cent of young people have SLCN, and your school has a close-to-average SEN population of 14 to 15 per cent, you can expect your school population to mirror this. In other words, you can expect two in every class of 30 pupils to have some form of SLCN.

In May 2010, the government published a report focused on the transitions between categories of SEN for pupils with SLCN and autism. It argued that pupils who initially had SLCN and who changed their category of primary need when they transferred to secondary school were most likely to be identified as having moderate or specific learning difficulties.

The report went on to argue that "the decline in the proportion of pupils identified as having SLCN as the pupils progress through secondary school needs close monitoring to ensure that ... pupils are being properly identified in terms of their special needs in the first instance (and that) pupils who do have SLCN receive adequate support as they progress through secondary school."

The report also found that, although the main problem was that many pupils were not identified as SLCN, some who were identified as such were in fact pupils for whom English was an additional language. It said that further investigation was needed in order to determine whether there was systematic misidentification of children's needs.

In the second part of this series next week (January 17), I'll look at how schools and teachers can identify pupils with SLCN, including the common risk factors and characteristics of SLCN. I will also consider how we can raise the profile of SLCN in schools to better support pupils. The remainder of this series will consider how to deliver quality first teaching, differentiation and interventions that help pupils with SLCN.

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Speech, language and communication needs can underpin many other problems. Continuing his series, **Matt Bromley** looks at how secondary schools must have good systems in place for identifying pupils with SLCN

# SLCN in key stage 3: Identification

In the first part of this series last week (January 10), I asked the simple question: what does SLCN stand for? I suspect many secondary school teachers are unfamiliar with the acronym and yet SLCN is a major cause of SEN in secondary school pupils.

SLCN stands for speech, language and communication needs. Speech, language and communication underpin basic literacy and are necessary for students to understand and achieve in all subjects. As such, all children and young people need good speech, language and communication skills in order to access the school curriculum, make good progress and achieve good outcomes, in school and in life.

What's more, speech, language and communication are closely linked to behaviour, and social, emotional and mental wellbeing because they influence how young people interact with their peers and how they feel about themselves.

## The impact of SLCN

Just 26 per cent of young children with SLCN make expected academic progress in the early years compared with 69 per cent of all children. Children living in areas of social disadvantage are at much higher risk, with around 50 per cent starting school with delayed language and other identified SLCN.

Just 15 per cent of pupils with SLCN achieve the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of their primary school years (compared with 61 per cent of all children) and only 20 per cent of pupils with SLCN gained grade 4 or above in English and maths at GCSE (compared with 64 per cent of all children).

SLCN also has an impact on pupils' social, emotional and mental health: 81 per cent of children with emotional and behavioural disorders have unidentified language difficulties. Young people referred to mental health services are three times more likely to have SLCN than those who have not been referred.

SLCN has an impact on pupils' future life chances. Children with poor vocabulary skills are twice as likely to be unemployed when they reach adulthood; 60 per cent of young offenders have low language skills.

Last week we said that one of the reasons SLCN is not widely understood in secondary schools is because pupils' needs are often wrongly identified and coded when they transfer from primary school.

The Communication Trust believes that an average of 40 per cent of children with SLCN are not being identified as such and, they say, the most difficult to spot are older pupils, particularly those who have difficulties with vocabulary, those who struggle with formulating sentences, and children with difficulties understanding.

Ultimately, the statistics suggest that you can expect two in every class of 30 pupils to have some form of SLCN. So what can secondary schools, school leaders and teachers do about it?

## Identifying pupils with SLCN

There are several common risk factors to look out for. For example, boys are more likely (at a ratio of 2.5:1) to have SLCN than girls. Summer-born pupils are 1.65 times more likely to have SLCN than those born in the autumn. And pupils eligible for free school meals are 2.3 times more likely to have SLCN than those not eligible. SLCN may manifest itself in pupils' limited social interactions, poor literacy skills, poor behaviour, low self-esteem and poor levels of achievement.

A pupil who is experiencing difficulties with receptive language may do some of the following:

- They may have a limited vocabulary knowledge compared with other children of their age.
- They may not volunteer answers in class.
- They may parrot what you've said but without understanding it.
- When you ask them a question, they may appear to be answering a different question.
- They may have difficulty following instructions.
- They may appear forgetful or may take time to decipher/process more complex and/or longer sentences.
- They may show disruptive behaviour or become quiet and withdrawn. This may be because they are unable to understand what is being asked of them, are frustrated, or are frightened of failing.

- After an instruction to the group, they may look around the room at what the other pupils are doing before they start the activity. They may not have understood the instruction and are using their peers' actions as clues to help them carry out the activity.
- They may appear to stop concentrating when you are talking to them in a group. They may not be able to understand what you are saying and so switch off.
- In activities that involve a lot of talking, like class discussions, they may be quiet and not join in, or they may join in but give inappropriate answers.

A pupil who is experiencing difficulties with expressive language may do some of the following:

- They may use the wrong words for things or use a word that sounds similar.
- They may use very general words where a more specific word would be better.
- Their language may sound immature compared with other children of their age.
- They may omit the endings of words.
- They may miss out the small parts of a sentence like determiners such as "the" and "a".
- They may wrongly order the words in a sentence, and/or miss important information in a sentence.
- They may seem to be struggling to express themselves, for example they may know a word but appear not to be able to access it, resulting in lots of fillers or gesticulation.

**Pupils eligible for free school meals are 2.3 times more likely to have SLCN than those not eligible. SLCN may manifest itself in pupils' limited social interactions, poor literacy skills, poor behaviour, low self-esteem and poor levels of achievement**

A pupil who is experiencing difficulties with social communication/pragmatic language, may do some of the following:

- They may find it difficult to take turns in conversation.
- They may find it difficult to follow social conventions and may have difficulties initiating and maintaining conversations.
- They may find it difficult to understand non-literal language such as metaphors and sarcasm, which they take literally.
- They may have poor eye contact – not appearing to look at you or at peers when talking with them.
- They may show some disruptive or difficult behaviour due to difficulties understanding how to use language flexibly for a range of purposes.
- They may not use much expression in their face or tone of voice.
- They may talk about the same topic of conversation over and over and/or change topic frequently.

A pupil who is experiencing difficulties with speech sounds may do some of the following:

- They may be unintelligible to unfamiliar listeners.
- They may omit parts of words and/or have difficulties making some specific sounds in speech.
- During phonics work, they may not be able to

produce – or discern the difference between – some of the sounds.

One form of SLCN is stammering although this does not always manifest itself as you might expect. A pupil with a stammer may do some of the following:

- They may prolong sounds (e.g. ssssssorry).
- They may "block", meaning that when they are attempting a word they make no sound at all or make a strangled sound.
- They may repeat sounds or parts of a word (e.g. s-s-si-sir, or p-p-please).

Understandably, some pupils become tense because of their stammer. They may have some tension in their face – particularly in the muscles around the eyes, lips or neck, and/or make extra movements when they speak, as though they are trying to force words out. They may blink or tap their hands or feet. Some pupils also try to mask their stammer. They may, for example, avoid speaking in certain situations or to certain people. They may also change the word they were going to use mid-sentence.

## What can teachers do to help?

A small number of pupils with the most severe SLCN will require specialist support such as speech and language therapy. Some will require some targeted interventions outside of the classroom. Most will require some tailored support in the classroom. And all will benefit from quality first teaching and from a learning

environment that supports their development. Before I proffer my own advice on how to support pupils with SLCN, let us hear what the pupils themselves say...

According to the charity, I CAN, pupils with SLCN say that to help them access the curriculum and make better progress they want:

- Opportunities to ask questions and seek clarifications.
- Teachers to use drawings and diagrams such as mind-maps to support verbal instructions.
- Teachers to explain what they need to include in their answers to questions.
- The use of bullet points instead of writing on the whiteboard and in handouts.
- To learn the vocabulary that they need to know before a lesson.
- Lessons where the teacher talks briefly and then they work in groups.
- Thinking time after a question is asked.
- Opportunities to work with a partner.

In the remainder of this series, I will share proven strategies for supporting pupils with SLCN. I will do so under the following headings: Quality first teaching, In-class differentiation, and Additional interventions.

## Quality first teaching

The best way to improve outcomes for pupils with

SLCN, as with any additional and different learning need, is through quality first teaching because, if we improve the quality of timetabled teaching in the classroom, all pupils – including those with SLCN – will make better progress.

A study by Hanushek and Rivkin (2006) found that teacher effectiveness had more impact on outcomes than anything else – pupils in the classroom of the most effective teacher out of a group of 50 teachers took just six months to make the same amount of progress that pupils taught by the least effective teacher took two years to achieve.

What's more, Hamre and Pianta's research (2005) showed that, in the classrooms of the most effective teachers, socio-economic differences were null and void – in other words, pupils from the most disadvantaged backgrounds made the same progress as the least disadvantaged.

Since the National Strategies were launched in the late-1990s, it has been common practice to talk of three waves of intervention for pupils with SEND.

The three-wave model is often expressed as a pyramid similar to Bloom's taxonomy, whereby Wave 1 sits at the bottom and thus provides the foundations on which all other forms of SEND support are built.

According to the National Strategies, Wave 1 is "quality inclusive teaching which takes into account the learning needs of all the pupils in the classroom".

As such, if we do not first provide pupils with quality classroom teaching, then no amount of additional intervention and support will help them to catch up.

A 2008 government paper defined the key characteristics of quality first teaching as follows:

- Highly focused lesson design with sharp objectives.
- High demands of pupil involvement and engagement with their learning.
- High levels of interaction for all pupils.
- Appropriate use of teacher questioning, modelling and explaining.
- An emphasis on learning through dialogue, with regular opportunities for pupils to talk both individually and in groups.
- An expectation that pupils will accept responsibility for their own learning and work independently.
- Regular use of encouragement and authentic praise to engage and motivate pupils.

National Strategy guidance also said that quality first teaching includes a balance between the following approaches:

- Directing and telling.
- Demonstrating.
- Explaining and illustrating.
- Questioning and discussing.
- Exploring and investigating.
- Consolidating and embedding.
- Reflecting on and talking through a process.
- Reflecting and evaluating.
- Summarising and reminding.
- Guided learning.

Next week, in part three of this series, I will continue my exploration of quality first teaching and then examine the central tenets of effective in-class differentiation and additional interventions.

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Continuing his series on supporting speech, language and communication needs, **Matt Bromley** looks at the key aspects of quality first teaching

# SLCN in key stage 3: Quality first teaching

In the first two articles of this five-part series, I explained what SLCN is and how schools can correctly identify pupils with SLCN and offer them support so that they can access the curriculum, make good progress and achieve good outcomes.

The research suggests that pupils with SLCN would like:

- Opportunities to ask questions and seek clarifications.
- Teachers to use drawings and diagrams such as mind-maps to support verbal instructions.
- Teachers to explain what they need to include in their answers to questions.
- The use of bullet points instead of writing on the whiteboard and in handouts.
- To learn the vocabulary that they need to know before a lesson.
- Lessons where the teacher talks briefly and then they work in groups.
- Thinking time after a question is asked.
- Opportunities to work with a partner.

As outlined last week, at the heart of good practice are three key things: quality first teaching, in-class differentiation, and additional interventions.

Last week I began to explore what is meant by the term “quality first teaching”. I said that the best way to improve outcomes for pupils with SLCN, as with any additional and different learning need, is through quality first teaching because, if we improve the quality of timetabled teaching in the classroom, all pupils – including those with SLCN – will make better progress.

## Four step teaching

In a previous article in *SecEd* (*A four-step teaching sequence*, June 2018: <http://bit.ly/2RPjbiX>), I argued that quality first teaching occurs when we introduce pupils to new curriculum content in four distinct stages: telling, showing, doing, practising.

Telling, I said, is the most effective, expedient way for pupils to acquire new information. It works like this: simply, the teacher – that educated, experienced expert at the front of class – tells pupils what they need to know. This is not to suggest that sometimes, for some purposes, other approaches are not also effective, but teacher explanations remain the most efficient method of teaching – not to mention the least likely to lead to misconceptions among pupils and a misunderstanding by the teacher of what pupils can and cannot do.

There are a few more tips to consider when using direct instruction with pupils with SLCN. Because pupils with SLCN:

- Find it difficult to listen to and understand lots of spoken language.
- Need more time to process spoken language.
- Can find it hard to separate out sounds, words, phrases.
- Can have visual strengths.

Pupils with SLCN will benefit from direct instruction in which their teachers:

- Cut down the amount of language used.
- Repeat important information several times.
- Build in time for processing answers to questions.
- Slow down and repeat instructions.
- Think aloud.
- Use visuals.
- Display key words on the board.
- Use sentence stems, mnemonics and other “schema”.

Showing, I said, is when teachers, having first explained something, make effective and plentiful use of models – exemplars of both good and bad work, as well as exemplars from a range of different contexts – which show pupils what a final product should look like and what makes such products work.

Good models demonstrate what works as well as what doesn't. It is important to show pupils what excellence looks like by sharing models of the very best work, giving them something to aspire to and an understanding of how to produce high quality work of their own.

But it is equally important to show pupils models of ineffective work, work that isn't quite the best, or perhaps is so very far from being the best, so that pupils can learn what not to do and how to avoid making the same mistakes themselves.

All the models, I said, should be dissected in front of pupils, with the teacher demonstrating the dissection process. Once pupils know how to dissect models, they should be afforded the opportunity to do so without the teacher's guidance, perhaps by teaching other pupils.

In order to prepare pupils for this, it is important that the teacher offers encouragement, gives specific instructions, uses thought or sentence stems to provide pupils with the right language, and – as I say above – directly demonstrates the process first.

Doing is when the teacher, having modelled something at the front of class, does so again but this time with pupils' help. Co-construction (or joint-construction) works well because the teacher engages pupils' thought processes and helps them by questioning their decisions and by prompting further decision-making. The teacher's role is not to construct another model themselves, but to ask targeted questions of pupils to encourage them to complete the model together, as well as to provide corrections and feedback along the way and drip-feed key vocabulary into the mix.

The teacher, therefore, will mostly be engaged in asking open questions such as, “Why did you choose that word?” “Is there another word which might fit better or have more impact?” “Why is this word better than this one?” “Should we use a short sentence here?” “Why/why not?” and “What is the effect of this, do you think?”

Practising, I said, is when pupils, having constructed a model together, do so again but this time do so independently. Independent practice not only provides a crucial third opportunity for pupils to practise (after teacher modelling and co-construction), it also enables pupils to demonstrate their own understanding and for the teacher to assess the extent to which they have “got it”.

Until a pupil completes a task by themselves, we – and perhaps they – cannot be certain they can do so or that information has been encoded in long-term memory. If pupils succeed, the teacher can move on. If not, the teacher can use the feedback information to guide further teaching of the subject, perhaps re-teaching key elements of it or engaging those pupils who have succeeded in teaching those who have not.

## Increasingly independent

Ultimately, whatever form it takes, quality first teaching should ensure that all pupils, including those with SEND:

- Are engaged, in the sense of being active participants in the process of learning not passive recipients of information.
- Are highly motivated to learn and enthusiastic about learning.
- Are challenged by hard work and know that making mistakes is an essential part of learning.
- Receive effective feedback about where they are now, where they need to go next, and how they will get there.
- As a result of feedback, make progress over time and become increasingly independent and resilient learners.

One way to enable pupils to become increasingly independent and resilient is to employ the popular “3B4ME” method, which encourages pupils to persevere when they get stuck and overcome challenges by themselves. It works like this: when a pupil experiences difficulty, before they ask for help, they must first use:

- 1 Brain (think for themselves).
- 2 Buddy (ask a peer).
- 3 Book or board (use classroom resources including wall displays and textbooks).

## It's good to (teach) talk

It is also helpful to teach pupils with SLCN how to engage in classroom discussions, and for the teacher to consider the way in which they and other adults speak to pupils...

## Pupil talk

In order to help pupils with SLCN engage in classroom

discussions and question-and-answer sessions, teachers need to teach pupils how to talk and work in groups. They need to provide plenty of opportunities for pupils to talk in class, to a partner, to a small group, to adults, and to the whole class. Teachers should also scaffold the questions they ask in order to build pupil confidence. They should give pupils time to process questions and instructions, building in “thinking time”. And they should make pupils aware of the range of resources available to support them.

## Teacher talk

It is important that teachers and support staff carefully consider the way in which they talk. For example, they should be cognisant of the length and complexity of the language they use with pupils, and consider the range and level of questions pupils understand. They should encourage pupils to engage in discussions with peers. They should model and scaffold if needed, and teach pupils how to recognise when they need help and how to ask for it. They should frequently check for understanding, perhaps involving other adults in the class where relevant.

## The importance of literacy

The Educational Endowment Foundation's report *Preparing for literacy* (June 2018) argues that approaches that emphasise spoken language and verbal interaction can support the development of communication and language and, in turn, communication and language can provide the foundations for learning and thinking and underpin the development of later literacy skills.

While being aimed at the early years, the report might prove helpful for key stage 3 teachers of pupils with SLCN. As such, perhaps you might consider activities to develop communication and language including shared reading, story-telling, or explicitly extending children's vocabulary.

These activities should be embedded within a curriculum of rich and varied experiences. Developing vocabulary is important for later literacy development, but it should not – the EEF warns – be seen as a silver bullet: “It should form part of a broad approach to improving communication, language, and literacy.”

In terms of shared reading, the EEF recommends using the PEER framework and this might be a useful tool to help pupils with SLCN to read aloud. It is a simple sequence that can be used to support shared, or “dialogic”, reading. When reading together, adults can pause and:

- Prompt the pupil to say something about the book.
  - Evaluate their response.
  - Expand their response by rephrasing or adding information to it.
  - Repeat the prompt to help them learn from the expansion.
- There are five main types of prompts that can be used as part of the PEER sequence. The prompts can be remembered using the acronym CROWD:
- Completion: leave a blank at the end of a sentence for pupils to complete (this works particularly well with books with rhymes or repetitive phrases).
  - Recall: ask pupils about something they have already read (these prompts support pupils to understand the story plot).
  - Open-ended: often with a focus on pictures in books (this works well with illustrations and encourages pupils to express their ideas).
  - Wh: prompts that begin with “who”, “what”, “where”, “why”, and “when” (“what” questions can be used to develop vocabulary).

- Distancing: connects the book to pupils' own life experiences and provides an opportunity for high quality discussion.

## More strategies

Some more quality first teaching strategies that work particularly well for pupils with SLCN (and indeed for all pupils) include KWL charts, dual coding, including the use of mind-maps, thinking time, and explicit vocabulary instruction.

## KWL charts

One common diagnostic technique and a means of acquiring data on pupils' starting points is asking pupils at the beginning of a lesson or new topic to identify what they already know (or think they know) about what they are about to study.

Their responses can then be listed in a table or graphic organiser. The contents of the first column provide us with a sense of pupils' prior knowledge, while also unmasking any misconceptions that may exist and therefore may need to be addressed.

Next, we should ask pupils to identify “what I want to learn” about the topic and ask them to raise any questions they may have at this early stage. These responses can be recorded in the second column to serve as indicators of areas of interest.

As the unit unfolds, the knowledge and skills that pupils begin to acquire should be recorded in the third column, providing a record for pupils of “what I have learned”.

An alternative to this is to begin a lesson or topic with an initial assessment, perhaps a low-stakes multiple-choice quiz. The results of these pre-tests can yield invaluable evidence about pupils' prior knowledge and misconceptions and, when repeated at various stages of the teaching sequence, can provide evidence of pupils' growing knowledge and understanding.

Regardless of the approach taken, information from diagnostic assessments can guide us in our planning so that lessons are more responsive to pupils' needs and existing knowledge-base – surely the very definition of differentiation.

An important practical implication, of course, is that we must remember to plan opportunities for assessments and allow sufficient “wriggle room” to make adjustments based on the feedback garnered by these assessments.

In-built flexibility like this is not just advisable, it is a key aspect of effective lesson-planning and differentiation because it enables learning to be personalised to match the needs and pace of pupils' learning – which is essential if we are to support pupils with SLCN. It also ensures that gaps in pupils' learning are identified and filled, which in turn will avoid an off-the-peg, one-size-fits-all approach to lesson-planning and enable good progress to be made by all pupils, irrespective of their additional and different needs.

## Next week

I will continue to explore these additional quality first teaching strategies when I will focus on dual coding, including the use of mind-maps, thinking time, and explicit vocabulary instruction.

• *Matt Bromley is an education journalist and author with 18 years' experience in teaching and leadership. He works as a consultant, speaker, and trainer. Visit [www.bromleyeducation.co.uk](http://www.bromleyeducation.co.uk) and to read previous articles in this series or for Matt's archive of best practice articles for SecEd, visit <http://bit.ly/1Uobmsl>*

Continuing his series, **Matt Bromley** offers more teaching strategies that are effective for pupils with speech, language and communication needs

# SLCN in key stage 3: More teaching strategies



Image: Adobe Stock

**S**o far in this five-part series on supporting pupils with speech, language and communication needs, we have explained how important it is to identify SLCN as a primary need when pupils transfer to secondary school so that appropriate interventions can be put in place. We said that support comes in three “waves”:

- Wave 1 is quality first teaching.
- Wave 2 is in-class differentiation.
- Wave 3 is additional interventions.

Last week we began looking at Wave 1 support strategies. Before we move on, let us explore some further strategies for quality first teaching that work particularly well for pupils with SLCN (and indeed for all pupils):

- Dual coding, including the use of mind-maps.
- Thinking time.
- Explicit vocabulary instruction.

## Dual coding

Dual coding is the combination of words and images. We have two specific yet connected cognitive subsystems: one specialises in representing and processing non-verbal objects or events; the other specialises in language. In other words, we process verbal and visual information separately and so can double the capacity of our working memory if we utilise both verbal and visual processing at the same time.

What’s more, dual coding allows us to boost the information traces in our long-term memory (as two connected traces are stronger than one single trace) and it enables us to recall – or recognise – the information in two different ways.

By combining an image with a complementary word (written or preferably spoken), we’re utilising both a verbal/semantic process (deciphering spoken/written words) and an iconic process (deciphering images).

Dual coding works particularly well for pupils with SLCN because, as we have already seen, these pupils tend to have strong visual processing capabilities and benefit from the use of diagrams such as mind-maps and from short bullet-points rather than lots of dense text.

However, as with all teaching strategies, dual coding only works when it’s done well. Reading a text aloud in parallel with the same written text on-screen (such as reading text verbatim from a PowerPoint slide) – even if this is short bullet points – is a bad combination because pupils are required to conduct one and the same verbal/semantic decoding process in two different ways. Rather than splitting and therefore doubling working memory capacity, it requires pupils to process twice the information using one process, thus halving working memory capacity. As a result, working memory becomes overloaded in what’s known as “the redundancy effect”.

The best way to make use of dual coding is to, for example, explain a visual (a diagram, graph, mind-map, etc) verbally, not through text on the visual. If there is writing on the visual, it’s best not to explain it. Furthermore, we should present visuals and text at the same time so that pupils don’t have to remember one part while processing the other.

## Thinking time

In 1974, Mary Budd Rowe conducted research into the way in which teachers asked pupils questions in the classroom. Her findings on “thinking time” or “wait time” – the amount of time, once a question has been asked, that a teacher allows to elapse before asking someone else or providing an answer themselves – were quite astonishing.

Rowe found that, on average, teachers left less than one second before answering their own question or before asking someone else to answer it.

Rowe also found that thinking time of less than one second prevented most pupils from taking part in classroom discussions because such a short interval did not allow enough time for pupils to think through the question and then formulate an answer. This is particularly pronounced for pupils with SLCN who often struggle to process information, formulate their thoughts and articulate an answer clearly and concisely.

Rowe’s research concluded that teachers, acknowledging their wait time was insufficient, compromised by asking more simple, closed questions where straightforward recall – as opposed to higher-order thinking – was enough for pupils to be able to provide an answer. As a further consequence of this, classroom talk was superficial.

The teachers involved in Rowe’s research were

encouraged to increase the amount of time they gave pupils to answer their questions. Teachers achieved this by allowing a period of time to elapse before pupils were allowed to put their hands up and answer. This extra time was used for one of the following purposes:

- Thinking time – allowing pupils time to process the question and think through their answers before anyone was allowed to volunteer a response aloud.
- Paired discussion time – allowing pupils to think about the question with a partner for a certain amount of time before giving an answer;
- Writing time – allowing pupils to draft their thoughts on paper first before giving their responses.

Most of the above involves pupils working together to discuss their thoughts before sharing them with the whole class. In this way, effective questioning involves pupils taking group responsibility – if pupils have time to discuss the answer in pairs or groups before anyone responds verbally, pupils are more ready to offer answers and to attempt more difficult thinking, because they know that others will help them.

Having “talking partners” as a regular feature of lessons is more democratic, too, because it allows every pupil in the room to think, to articulate and therefore to extend their learning. This has two advantages: first, pupils with SLCN and those who are reluctant to volunteer answers get to find their voice; second, the garrulous, over-confident pupils get to learn to listen to others. In short, it creates a spirit or ethos of cooperation which is at the heart of formative assessment.

Once the teachers in Rowe’s study had had the opportunity to get used to increasing their wait time, Rowe went back to look at the effect it had had. She found:

- Pupils’ answers were longer.
- Pupils’ failure to respond had decreased.
- Responses were more confident.
- Pupils challenged and/or improved other pupils’ answers.
- More alternative explanations were being offered.

Teachers involved in the King’s Medway Oxfordshire Formative Assessment project, which began in 1999 and was undertaken by Professors Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam as part of their initial research into the effects of formative assessment, found that “increasing waiting time after asking questions proved difficult to start with ... the pause after asking the question was sometimes painful (and) unnatural ... (but) given more thinking time, students seemed to realise that a more thoughtful answer was required (and that they now) give an answer and an explanation without additional prompting.”

For obvious reasons, pupils with SLCN particularly benefit from being afforded more thinking time to process what has been asked and to articulate a response. To ensure thinking time is especially effective for them, the teacher or teaching assistant can: warn pupils they’re going to ask a question, explicitly teach clarification questions, model asking questions, use strate-

gies such as “snow-balling”, flag up questions at the beginning of the lesson, provide a list of key questions in advance, or ask pupils to draw and/or write down an answer before they put their hand up.

## Explicit vocabulary instruction

Department for Education research suggests that, by the age of seven, the gap in the vocabulary known by children in the top and bottom quartiles is something like 4,000 words (children in the top quartile know around 7,000 words).

For this reason, when teaching pupils with SLCN, teachers need to be mindful of the importance of vocabulary and support its development so that pupils who, because of a specific need, did not develop this foundational knowledge before they started school and through primary school are now helped to access the curriculum.

One way to do this is to plan group work activities which provide an opportunity for pupils with SLCN to mingle with pupils with a more developed vocabulary, to hear language being used by pupils of their own age and in ways that they might not otherwise encounter.

Another solution is to model the clear and correct use of spoken language. In other words, we should give unambiguous instructions, use accurate descriptive and positional language, utilise precise terminology where appropriate, and give clear feedback.

Next, teachers can use simple, direct language and place verbs at the beginning of instructions. “Teacher talk” is not necessarily better than the language pupils access in other environments but it is different. As a result, pupils’ language proficiency might be different from that required to access the curriculum, or even to understand simple classroom instructions.

Confusion and disobedience can result from the fact that pupils are unfamiliar with the language structures and “lexical density” of the more formal teacherly language of the classroom. This does not mean that teachers should use the same language as their pupils, but that they might sometimes need to use simpler language and emphasise important words.

Furthermore, teachers can teach active listening skills. Most pupils can hear, but are not naturally active listeners. Active listening requires selective and sustained attention, working memory, cognitive processing, and information storage and recall mechanisms. Teachers can help pupils develop these skills by giving them tasks such as listening for specific or key information, listening in order to answer specific questions, and listening to follow instructions.

Teachers can also teach note-taking skills whereby pupils have to write down the key points ascertained from a piece of spoken language. What’s more, they can develop communication skills, such as turn-taking and the use of eye contact.

Teachers can build on pupils’ language by elaborating on their answers to questions, adding new information, extending the conversation through further questioning, or reinforcing language through repetition.

To help pupils with SLCN build their vocabularies, teachers can also:

- Use fewer “what?” questions and use more “why?” and “how?” questions.
- Give pupils time to rehearse answers to questions, perhaps by discussing their answers in pairs before sharing them more widely.
- After each question has been asked, give pupils thinking time before they are expected to share their answers.
- Enforce a “no-hands-up” policy as often as possible.
- Model the kind of language they expect pupils to use in group discussions and answers.
- Explicitly teach key words in their subject and by repeating key words as often as possible (give key words as homework and test pupils on their spelling and meaning so that they become the expected discourse of all pupils).

In addition to the above, teachers of pupils with SLCN should make sure that the development of spoken language permeates the school day. After all, spoken language is used all day, every day so we should take advantage and build spoken language activities into daily routines, such as during tutor time (e.g. ask a question of each pupil that must be answered in a sentence), when handing out materials, when pupils enter and leave the classroom, and when giving instructions.

Teachers can also make sure that pupils have a regular opportunity to speak. The teacher tends to dominate classroom discussion – and it is right that teachers talk a lot because they are the experts in the room in possession of the knowledge and experience that pupils need. But it is also important that pupils get a chance to interact with the teacher and with each other and to do so beyond responding to closed questions.

What’s more, teachers can plan opportunities for one-to-one discussion. Spoken language develops best through paired conversation and when one of the people in the pair has a better developed vocabulary. Therefore, it is worth investigating ways of pairing up pupils with people with more sophisticated language skills, perhaps an older pupil or a parent or volunteer. This could be a case of volunteers reading a book with a pupil or simply engaging in conversation. One-to-one conversation also enables young people with SLCN to develop conversational skills such as turn-taking, intonation and eye contact.

## Next week

In the final instalment, I will conclude my discussion about quality first teaching strategies and explore the Wave 2 and 3 intervention strategies. **SecEd**

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The final part of **Matt Bromley's** series on supporting speech, language and communication needs looks at strategies for effective differentiation and additional interventions

# SLCN in key stage 3: Effective interventions



Image: Adobe Stock

**E**arlier in this series I shared some common characteristics to help teachers and school leaders identify speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) and explained why support for SLCN is crucial to enabling pupils to access the curriculum and make progress. I also shared some proven strategies for supporting pupils with SLCN through quality first teaching (wave 1).

Before we focus on proven strategies for in-class differentiation (wave 2) and additional interventions (wave 3), and to conclude my discussion of quality first teaching strategies, I would like to add some further thoughts on the explicit teaching of vocabulary (see part four).

The Educational Endowment Foundation (EEF) report, *Preparing for Literacy* (2018), claims that there is relatively limited evidence about how best to improve vocabulary, but the existing evidence suggests that the following should be considered:

- Providing pupils with a rich language environment (implicit approaches) as well as directly extending pupils' vocabulary (explicit approaches).
- Carefully selecting high-frequency words for explicit teaching.
- Developing the number of words pupils know (breadth) and their understanding of relationships between words and the contexts in which words can be used (depth).
- Providing multiple opportunities to hear and use new vocabulary.

In terms of selecting high-frequency words for explicit instruction, it may be wise to begin by teaching the "Tier 2" words identified by Dr Isabel Beck. Tier 2 words are those words which appear commonly in written texts but not in spoken language. They are not subject-specific terminology nor necessarily complex words, but are words that are vital to pupils' ability to access the school curriculum and to them being able to demonstrate their understanding.

Once these words have been identified, they need to be taught on a number of occasions and in different contexts. Beck offers this possible teaching sequence:

- Read a sentence in which the word appears.
- Show pupils the word and get them to say it out loud.
- Discuss possible meanings of the word.
- Identify any parts of the word that may be familiar (e.g. Greek or Latinate roots, common prefixes and suffixes).
- Re-read the sentence with the word in it to detect any contextual clues.
- Explicitly explain the meaning of the word through definition and the use of synonyms.
- Provide several other examples of the word being used in context.
- Ask pupils to use the word in sentences of their own.

The EEF also says that prioritising high-quality interactions with children will help to develop their communication and language. A distinction is sometimes drawn between talking with children and simply talking to children. Talking to children tends to be more passive, while talking with children is based on their immediate experiences and activities and is likely to be more effective: "When done well, high-quality interactions often look effortless, but they are not easy to do well and professional development is likely to be beneficial."

Multiple frameworks exist to help structure high-quality interactions. Guided interaction occurs when a teacher and pupil collaborate on a task and the teacher's strategies are highly tuned to the pupil's capabilities and motivations. The teacher is responsive to the pupil's intentions, focuses on spontaneous learning, and provides opportunities for the pupil's feedback. Discussion is a key feature of this approach and the use of a variety of questions helps to develop and extend pupil's thinking.

Sustained shared thinking involves two or more people working together to solve a problem, clarify an issue, evaluate activities, or extend a narrative. Key features include all parties contributing to the interaction – one aimed at extending and developing pupils' thinking. According to the EEF, techniques that teachers might use include:

- Tuning in: listening carefully to what is being said and observing what the pupil is doing.
- Showing genuine interest: giving whole attention, eye contact, and smiling and nodding.
- Asking pupils to elaborate: "I really want to know more about this."
- Re-capping: "So you think that..."

- Giving their own experience: "I like to listen to music when cooking at home."
- Clarifying ideas: "So you think we should wear coats in case it rains?"
- Using encouragement to extend thinking: "You have thought really hard about your tower, but what can you do next?"
- Suggesting: "You may want to try doing it like this..."
- Reminding: "Don't forget that you said we should wear coats in case it rains."
- Asking open questions: "How did you...?", "Why does this...?", "What happens next?"

## Waves 2 and 3

Some pupils will require more tailored support in the guise of wave 2 in-class differentiations and wave 3 additional interventions which take place outside the classroom and off the taught timetable.

**“Let us first be clear that the ultimate aim of such additional support, in most cases, is for it to become redundant over time. In other words, we want pupils with SLCN to become increasingly independent”**

Such intervention strategies may take the form of one-to-one support from a teaching assistant, small group targeted teaching by an SEN specialist, or support from external agencies such as speech and language therapists.

Let us first be clear that the ultimate aim of such additional support, in most cases, is for it to become redundant over time. In other words, we want pupils with SLCN to become increasingly independent.

As such, it is important to ensure that all strategic interventions aimed at pupils with SLCN are monitored while they are happening. Often, schools review an intervention once it has ended, but this is not enough. Interventions must be monitored while they are still taking place in order to ascertain whether or not they are working, or working as well as they should be. If the monitoring data suggests a strategy is not having the desired effect, or not working for some pupils, then it must be stopped or changed before more time and money is wasted.

Another point worth making concerns the role of teaching assistants, because it is often they and not teachers who lead wave 2 and 3 interventions for pupils with SEN including SLCN. So the big question is this: what is the best way to utilise teaching assistants? Here are some tips inspired by the EEF research. Teaching assistants:

- Should not be used as an informal teaching resource for pupils with SLCN.
- Should be used to add value to what teachers do, rather than replace teachers – pupils with SLCN need as much, if not more, exposure to the teacher as all other pupils.
- Should be used to help pupils with SLCN to develop independent learning skills and manage their own learning. To achieve this, they need to be trained to avoid prioritising task completion and instead concentrate on helping pupils with SLCN to develop personal ownership of tasks.
- Should be fully prepared for their role in the classroom and need access to sufficient training and time to meet the teacher outside of class.

Furthermore, when supporting pupils with SLCN in one-on-one or small group settings, teaching assistants should use structured interventions. The most effective intervention strategies are:

- Brief (20 to 50 minutes).
- Regular (three to five times per week).
- Sustained (running for eight to 20 weeks).
- Carefully timetabled.
- Staffed by well-trained teaching assistants (five to 30 hours' training per intervention).
- Well-planned with structured resources and clear objectives.
- Assessed to identify appropriate pupils, guide areas for focus and track pupil progress.
- Linked to classroom teaching.

## Differentiation & interventions

In terms of in-class differentiation, pupils with SLCN are often helped by:

- The use of modified language.
  - The use of visual prompts.
  - The pre-teaching of subject-specific vocabulary, as appropriate.
  - Access to a social skills group.
- In terms of additional interventions, pupils with SLCN are often helped by:
- Small group or one-to-one support for language to address specifically identified pupil targets.
  - Access to explicit social skills teaching.
  - Access to additional ICT teaching such as touch-typing, dictaphone, tablet and so on.

- A referral to and advice from the speech and language therapy service and the Learning Language Service (LLS).
- On-going advice from specialist teachers.
- Advice from an educational psychologist.

## A graduated approach

The provision of SEN support including that for pupils with SLCN – as articulated in the SEND Code of Practice – often takes the form of a four-part cycle of assess, plan, do, review.

The cycle recommended by the Code of Practice posits a "graduated approach" whereby actions are reviewed and refined as our understanding of a pupil's needs – and indeed the support they require – increases.

**Assess:** At this stage, information is gathered from on-going, day-to-day assessments and this helps to form judgements about the progress an individual pupil with SLCN is making, as well as to highlight any barriers that pupils may face.

Where concerns about a pupil's progress persist, further discussions with the pupil, their parents and the SENCO may be necessary. It may also be necessary to conduct further specialist tests, or to request advice from a speech and language therapist.

**Plan:** At this stage, everyone needs to agree what additional and different support will be put in place. The planning stage should involve the pupil, their parents, and relevant school staff who know the pupil well. The first step is to agree some targets for the pupil in order to focus attention on what needs to improve first, and to give the pupil a clear idea of what they need to do to accelerate the pace of their progress.

To help the pupil achieve their targets, additional tailored support needs to be put in place and this may include specific teaching strategies, approaches or resources both in and out of class, such as those outlined above and in part 4 last week. Clear and realistic timescales need to be set for monitoring and reviewing the plan. As I say above, it is crucial that additional interventions are subject to on-going monitoring rather than just reviewed at their end-point.

**Do:** The third part of the cycle is "do". It is the responsibility of every staff member who comes into contact with the pupil with SLCN to implement the plan on a day-to-day basis. It is not the sole domain of the SENCO. In practice, this might involve:

- Delivering quality first teaching to the pupil in every lesson.
- Enacting any specific adjustments, strategies or approaches to classroom teaching as identified in the individual support plan.
- Liaising with teaching assistants who are providing in-class support to pupils with SLCN.
- Implementing any targeted additional, out-of-class interventions as identified in the plan.
- Engaging in on-going monitoring of pupil progress and responding to the data by making any necessary adjustments to planning and teaching.
- Communicating regularly with the pupil, their parents, the SENCO and any other staff and external agents who are involved.

**Review:** The school needs to formally evaluate how successfully the interventions and support they have offered have met the pupil's needs. At the review meeting, it is helpful to consider the following questions:

- What progress has the pupil made with regards addressing their SLCN? Have they achieved their agreed targets and what is the evidence for this?
  - What impact has the support/intervention had on the pupil being able to access the curriculum, make progress and communicate their learning? What are the pupil's, parents' and professionals' views on the effectiveness and impact of the additional support/intervention?
  - What changes need to be made to the pupil's targets and the specialist provision next term/year?
- The SEND Code of Practice makes clear that this is a process and is therefore continual. Even if a review shows a pupil has made good progress and no longer requires additional support in order to mitigate their SLCN, they should still be monitored in order to ensure that their progress is sustained through inclusive quality first teaching. SecEd

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