Speech, language & communication

Creating an inclusive classroom

The role of teachers

The Teachers' Standards (2011) highlights the role of teachers in supporting all pupils’ spoken language skills, as well as being able to identify and support those pupils who are struggling to develop these skills.

Teachers must:

- demonstrate an understanding of, and take responsibility for, promoting high standards of literacy, articulacy and the correct use of standard English
- demonstrate an awareness of the physical, social and intellectual development of children and know when and how to differentiate appropriately.

Effective use of spoken and written language is key across the curriculum for both primary and secondary pupils. Literacy is the golden key that unlocks access to the curriculum and it is the responsibility of all teachers to think about the speech, language and communication development of all their pupils. For example;

- Mathematics: Language is crucial to support the development of mathematical vocabulary and presenting a mathematical justification
- Science: The language that pupils hear and speak allows them to develop their scientific vocabulary and ability to articulate scientific concepts clearly and precisely.

Working with children with Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) in the classroom

What might you see in the classroom?

Pupils with SLCN have varied profiles and so the impact on their learning also varies. Their profile of strengths and areas of need will be different:

- pupils might be unwilling to talk in class because they know they get things wrong, can't get their message across, can't keep up, haven't had time to work out what to say, or don't always understand. They therefore avoid asking or answering questions or joining in table/class discussions and so miss out on many learning opportunities
- pupils might become isolated from peers, lack self esteem and confidence, and might lose the motivation to try, participate and learn
- pupils might be unable to demonstrate their knowledge, skills or learning effectively to the teacher or in formal tests/exams. This might lead to them acting out or demonstrating poor behaviour
- A pupil with very poor speech may be difficult to understand and find reading and writing very challenging, but they may understand all that is said to them and have good social skills, with a great set of friends
- A pupil may have good speech but find it very difficult to put their thoughts into words, find the words they want, or say and write long sentences
- A pupil with good speech and language may find the world of communication very confusing and not know how to interact and socialise, or 'read' situations, leading to disagreements or inappropriate behaviour and becoming isolated from their peers
- A pupil may struggle to understand the language being spoken to them and may not be able to follow what is going on. They may not understand what they are expected to do, or what specific words mean, which may lead to them doing the wrong thing and getting into trouble

The variation in the profiles and ages of pupils with SLCN means that the impact on their learning will vary. Overall lots of learning in schools and early years settings involves listening, understanding, talking and interacting with others, and using literacy skills – all areas that pupils with SLCN will potentially have some difficulty with.
If a pupil has speech difficulties, impacts on learning could be:
- being unable to tell the differences between sounds or say sounds when learning new words or decoding in reading
- poor phonological awareness and the consequent challenges of learning to read and spell
- storing new words in their memory inaccurately, making it hard to remember or retrieve new vocabulary
- not understanding what is said and what they have to do

If a pupil has spoken language difficulties, the impact on learning could include:
- finding it hard to learn and remember new words, leading to a poor or limited vocabulary. This will make it difficult to explain things or ideas, use the right words, or say or write what has happened. Learning new topic words e.g. in maths or science may be hard
- struggling to make up stories or explain what has happened when talking or writing. They may have problems sequencing ideas, and get things confused and in the wrong order, or not be precise enough. All these will make it difficult for the listener or reader to follow.
- only being able to say or write simple or muddled sentences for their age which lack detail or sophistication
- being slower to learn to read and slower when reading because key predictive strategies such as using phonological skills, drawing on their knowledge of vocabulary or the type of word that might fit may not be available to them
- finding it hard to hold, or play around with, language and ideas in their head when thinking, planning, discussing or when problem solving

If a pupil has difficulty understanding language, the impact on learning could include:
- difficulties understanding the meaning of common and more complicated or subject specific words
- misunderstanding instructions or expectations and then doing the wrong thing either around the classroom/school, in their books or on screen, and subsequently getting behind in their work
- confusing meaning about the language of the future or the past and then making errors or missing out on something
- not understanding what they are reading whether a story book, a text book, online instructions, or an exam question
- being slow to answer when spoken to or not being able to respond, perhaps requiring repetition or extra time to process
- responding incorrectly to words and sentences that can mean more than one thing, e.g. ‘pull your socks up’
- difficulty picking out the main idea, so written work can go off on a tangent, or answers appear odd or strategies, particularly to reinforce understanding and new vocabulary
- finding it difficult to join in play, games, activities, or conversations, preferring something where less language is needed, therefore limiting opportunities to learn through interaction or be accepted as part of the group
- not understanding rules of games or how social interaction works, leading to exclusion from the group
- being distracted or upset by a change of routine or interruption to the point of not being able to participate or learn
- poor organisation skills, ability to work independently or to prioritise, which can lead to unfinished work or missing deadlines

How can you promote development in speech, language and communication in your classroom?
All children need to develop these skills, so creating a classroom environment that promotes the development of these key areas for all children will help both those who have needs and difficulties around SLCN and those who don’t. A classroom that is positive about developing speech language and communication is more likely to promote positive development with children who have latent needs or difficulties, so they don’t turn in to more significant issues.

Create a class environment which is ‘communication friendly’
Make communication as easy, effective and enjoyable as possible by giving opportunities for pupils to listen, participate and understand. Aim to do this by:
- having clear and consistent routines and expectations, supported visually
- using age appropriate visual support

If a pupil has difficulty with communication, the impact on learning could include:
- creating an asking friendly classroom where it is expected and OK to ask questions or seek clarification
- reducing noise levels and managing auditory distractions
- building in extra thinking time for all pupils to process questions or instructions
- ensuring all adults in the room know their role in supporting communication to the class and individuals.
Supporting pupils who have SLCN or who you think might have needs or difficulties in this area:

**Plan, prepare and differentiate**

As a teacher, it’s essential that you take time to understand a pupil’s needs to allow you to support them effectively. When planning, consider how you will ensure that pupils with SLCN can participate, based on what you know and understand about them as an individual. Perhaps you’ll need to plan to pre-teach some new vocabulary that they’ll struggle to learn, or you may need to think carefully about how to include a pupil in small group work. All pupils will, at least to some extent, be able to tell you about what helps them in class. Whenever possible, integrate this into your planning. For more information about involving children and young people in discussions about their support, see the Involving Children and Young People with SLCN Toolkit or its accompanying brief guide which you can print out and keep in your setting, referenced at the end of this information sheet.

**Specific strategies if they have difficulty expressing themselves:**

- listen carefully, make the best use of any contextual clues and show your interest by maintaining eye contact, be patient and let them know you will wait, make sure they are not rushed or feeling rushed and offer help and support when they ask for it
- do not correct, instead provide the right version of spoken language in a natural way which doesn't interrupt the conversation
- give realistic feedback or specific praise for successful communication e.g. ‘when you did x you were really clear’, but be honest when you have not understood and suggest perhaps there is another way to explain it or show it
- respond to what they are trying to say rather than how, at times you may have to say that you cannot understand
- if a pupil is stuck for a word, ask if they need help – prompt by asking if it is long or short or what the first sound is
- increase opportunities for real dialogue and conversation, take short turns
- sometimes another pupil can follow what they can’t, if so ask if it is OK to ask one of their friends to help
- provide sentence frames with examples of how to use more complex language - prompt with cues such as ‘first,’ ‘then,’ ‘last.’

**If they have difficulty understanding what is being said or asked of them:**

- make sure you are facing them when giving information, use a phrase like ‘everyone needs to listen to this’
- use their name at the start of instructions if they are not focused and ask them if they need them repeated
- give an overview first, summarise where necessary before you go into detail and emphasise key words
- give pointers for what they should be listening out for, e.g. ‘It’s important you remember X from what I am going to tell you’
- use simpler language and shorter sentences. Chunk your language and only include the important points
- avoid or explain difficult words or idioms for example say ‘make’ or ‘write’ instead of ‘produce’
- slow your speech and use pauses to enable them to listen and process what they hear. Repeat and rephrase where necessary
- ask the young person to repeat back in their own words, so you will know how much they have understood
- encourage them to repeat what they have to remember ‘in their head’ or to visualise what they have to do
- support children to recognise when they do not understand. Give them ways to ask for help such as ‘can you say that again please’. Teach and encourage the use of clarification strategies such as asking ‘What does X mean?’
If they have difficulty with communicating with adults or peers:

- praise good listening skills - encourage them to wait for a gap, or a clear signal from the speaker before joining in
- encourage them to look at the non-verbal cues to help understand what the other person thinks and feels, e.g. when someone pauses, that means you can have a turn
- discuss how tone of voice, facial expression and posture give clues to emotions
- use scenarios or real life examples to explain how turn taking works and why it is important to listen to other people’s views
- include them in a game or activity with a few other pupils, supervised by an adult, to facilitate good communication and a clear understanding of rules and expectations
- teach useful phrases such as ‘can I just say...’ or ‘sorry to interrupt but...’ or ‘you carry on....’ or ‘can I have a turn’
- explore social communication rules through role play and discuss what happens when they are broken
- explain about different ways of speaking to different people in different contexts. Discuss the effects of saying the wrong thing in the wrong way to the wrong person
- if they say something that is not appropriate to the situation, explain why it might be considered rude
- encourage them to think about and discuss how stories, current events and personal relationships make them feel
- specifically teach negotiation skills and give strategies to support self-organisation and prioritisation
- discuss how people manage their emotions, how they might use language in their head to self-regulate what they say and do.

Find Out More

The Communication Trust has a range of materials that can support teachers in their work in the classroom, and we have selected some of the key resources that will help you in working with children with SLCN in your classroom:

Classroom Observation Tool

The Classroom Observation Tool is a framework for thinking about how well your classroom is designed to meet the speech, language and communication needs of children. You can use it to review your own practice and to think about what you can do to address the needs of particular children. You can download the Classroom Observation Tool for free.

Communicating the Curriculum

Communicating the Curriculum is a practical resource to help primary schools define and monitor children’s progress in spoken language. It not only helps to show schools how the programme of study statements can be broken down in relation to the typical stages of language development, but also how they can use this to identify a pupil’s progression. You can download Communicating the Curriculum for free and you might also find it useful to refer to the Communication Trust Checklist 5-11 in thinking about how to identify whether individual children have speech, language and communication needs.

Involving Children and Young People with SLCN

The Communication Trust has produced two resources, covering the strategies you can use to gain the views, wishes and feelings of children and young people, ideas and advice to enable them to participate as fully as possible in decision making, and information about how to help them achieve the best possible outcomes. The resource, A Brief Guide to Involving Children and Young People, is accompanied by a series of printable resources for your setting, and, if you want to learn more about the topic, the ‘Involving Children and Young People Toolkit’ is a larger, more in-depth resource.

Online short course

The online CPD short course is free and a great place to start learning about children and young people’s speech, language and communication development. It looks at how you can support the development of these skills on a day-to-day basis in your setting, and how to spot children and young people who might be struggling to develop these important skills. You have the option to access four different pathways – early years, primary, secondary or further education so you can choose which pathway is most relevant to your area of work.

Primary and Secondary Progression Tools

The Primary and Secondary Progression Tools aim to support
teaching staff to identify children who may be struggling to develop their speech, language and communication skills. They can also be used to track progression of these skills over time or following interventions.

The Speech, Language and Communication Framework (SLCF)

Developed by The Communication Trust, the SLCF is a free online professional development tool which sets out the key skills and knowledge needed by the children and young people’s workforce to support the speech, language and communication development of all children and young people. Use it to rate your confidence in key areas and access activities on the Universal level.

What Works

Professionals should engage with evidence and use their practical experience of working in the classroom, and knowledge of the needs of individual pupils, to think about how that evidence might be relevant for particular pupils. The Communication Trust’s What Works database contains evidence about effective strategies and interventions with children with SLCN. The What Works Training database brings together evaluated speech, language and communication training programmes to enable you to find out more about their evidence. In the case study material, you are asked to explore this resource in relation to particular scenarios in the classroom. As you progress as a beginning teacher, one element of good inclusive practice is to take responsibility for your own professional development, including engaging with the evidence base for teaching and learning (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2012).

Other Resources

- The Communication Trust www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk
- ICAN www.ican.org.uk
As well as ICAN’s own website, consider visiting their Talking Point website which has a range of advice and resources for teachers on supporting the needs of children in the classroom (www.talkingpoint.org.uk/teachers)
- Afasic www.afasic.org.uk
- NAPLIC www.naplic.org.uk
- Ambitious about Autism www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk
- British Stammering Association www.stammering.org
Take a look at the Communication Consortium Catalogue to find information about other organisations that provide resources and information which help to improve understanding of children’s speech, language and communication development and how to support children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/consortiumcatalog