Appendix 2: Approaches to developing literacy

A hybrid approach

For many children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) a hybrid or mixed approach to developing literacy is necessary if they are to make progress and to retain and build on that progress. A hybrid approach enables children to use their understanding of the meaning of word (semantics) and their understanding of sentence and word construction (syntax) to help them read.

A hybrid approach uses both whole word and phonics learning within a language rich environment in order to target both vocabulary knowledge (what words mean and how they’re made up, i.e. number of syllables, initial and final sounds, prefixes, suffixes, etc) and phonological awareness skills (for example, awareness of rhyme, alliteration, sound blending, etc).

Synthetic phonics is balanced with reading for comprehension and reading for pleasure to enable a rounded approach for these children.

Developing foundation skills

Children need foundation skills for reading, including listening, attention, being able to listen and discriminate between sounds in words (auditory discrimination) and verbal understanding of words and sentences. These skills will be insufficiently developed in many children with SLCN and will need to be supported to maximise their progress in literacy.

‘Oral language approaches incorporating vocabulary development and listening comprehension can be as effective (or possibly more effective) as a treatment for reading comprehension difficulties as text-based approaches.’

For some children, for example those with mild language delay, language development can be supported through the provision of a rich language environment in which children are exposed to and interact with increasingly complex and rich oral language. The children benefit from incidental learning, facilitated by teaching staff as they experience language in different ways and are provided with opportunities for ‘talk’.

However, other children, including those with severe language delays, specific language impairments or hearing impairments, are less able to benefit from incidental learning and require more structured teaching of vocabulary, concepts and sentence structures.
Developing vocabulary

Vocabulary knowledge is a key foundation for literacy; research consistently finds that the extent of a child’s vocabulary knowledge relates strongly to their reading comprehension and overall academic success. If children who have just started learning to read know the words they are reading, they can more easily and quickly sound out, read, and understand them, as well as comprehend what they’re reading. A solid vocabulary is the bridge between phonics and reading comprehension.

Ensuring a whole school approach

Whole school approaches would include:

✔ Increasing teacher awareness of speech, language and communication to support all children’s development and identify children who are struggling
✔ Developing a language rich environment through teaching that includes supporting talk in the classroom
✔ Including a focus on vocabulary and phonological awareness in a structured and systematic way
✔ Implementing and resourcing teaching strategies, which heighten multisensory cues for teaching phonics when needed

Developing policies

✔ Including speech, language and communication within school policies will support the development of literacy skills
✔ A literacy policy must focus on reading for meaning and language comprehension alongside decoding and phonic approaches. Phonics should therefore be set within a wider literacy strategy that includes a focus on language and comprehension and a range of approaches and strategies
✔ A focus on language and communication would ensure a solid foundation for literacy for all children and would support children with special education needs or English as an additional language, enabling schools to narrow the gap between highest and lowest achieving children
✔ A special educational needs (SEN) policy will need to contain use of visual strategies
✔ Schools’ literacy policies should reflect the fact that all pupils, regardless of special needs, should access the literacy strategy at a level appropriate to their abilities. This needs to be informed by adapted assessments where necessary and the result of collaborative working by a multidisciplinary team
✔ All schools benefit from a Communication Policy as part of the Literacy Policy. This should outline specific strategies and areas of responsibility/co-ordination. It will also assist in ensuring that they are cohesive across the school
✔ Any school with children who use Augmentative and Alternative communication (AAC) will benefit from an integrated or even a separate AAC Policy
Involving parents

Whilst parents’ participation and encouragement in reading with their child is acknowledged for all children, it’s of particular value in enhancing the early literacy skills of children with language difficulties.  

Working with speech and language therapists

Schools may need support to access language enrichment programmes and resources; they may benefit from advice from speech and language therapists to develop communication friendly environments and language enrichment programmes. School staff may need training from speech and language therapists and specialist teachers about the building blocks and pre-skills for language and literacy.