The Link

SECONDARY

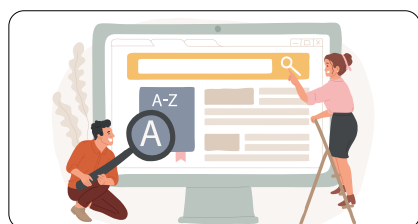CARBON BALANCED PAPER
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ISSUE **6** 2025

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Secondary Language Link is a finalist in the ERA awards 2025.

2025 FINALIST

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ADHD – TOP TIPS FROM THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO SLCN
Page 3

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THE LINK BETWEEN SLCN AND SEMH
Page 16

£4.95

Dear SENCo,

"Communication difficulties put children at greater risk of poor literacy, mental health issues and poorer employment outcomes in adulthood." (The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT)).

If that alone isn't reason enough to prioritise support for pupils with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), what is? As a SENCo, you and your team are uniquely placed to make a lasting impact—especially for those students who might otherwise be overlooked.

So, what can you expect in this issue?

Reading is a great way to support language development and instilling a love of books is key. On page 4, **Louise Emerson**, specialist speech and language therapist, provides really sound advice for engaging young people with a wide range of texts.

The link between SLCN and SEMH is not a new concept, yet it continues to surprise some. As **Kate Freeman**, consultant – speech and language in education, aptly puts it, "Recognising and addressing the link between SLCN and SEMH needs is a moral and educational imperative." Find out more on page 16.

On page 10, **Ali Neale**, occupational therapist, shares practical strategies for using sensory circuits to support self-regulation—a vital skill, that for some students requires targeted support and practice.

We're also thrilled to announce that Ali will be joining us as a guest speaker at this year's *Link Live Speech & Language Day*. Tickets are now available for Link Community members. Check out page 3 to find out more.

Finally, we're thrilled to share that we are finalists in two categories in this year's ERA Awards!

Secondary Language Link is a finalist in the **Special Education Resource or Equipment** category, read a full review of the package on page 12.

The Link Community has also been shortlisted as a finalist in the **Free SEND Resource** category. Turn to page 17 for more information about member benefits.

We hope you enjoy reading this issue as much as we have enjoyed creating it.

We wish you a summer term full of learning, progress and new opportunities for all!

Best wishes,

Claire Chambers

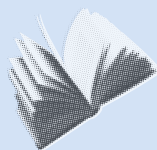*Editor, The Link, Speech & Language Link, award-winning support for SLCN*

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ADHD glossary

limit distractions hyperactivity difficulties LISTENING Remain on task Clear boundaries ASD IMPULSIVENESS

Excerpted from: The Ultimate Guide to SLCN
By **Sophie Mustoe-Playfair** and **Louise Burton**, specialist speech and language therapists

Facts about Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a common neurodevelopmental disorder causing two types of behavioural difficulties: inattentiveness and hyperactivity/impulsiveness. Most people with ADHD show both types, but not always. Children with predominantly inattentive difficulties and little hyperactivity may be described as having attention deficit disorder (ADD), which can go unnoticed as symptoms are less disruptive.

Prevalence

Approximately 3-5% of school-aged children are affected by ADHD, more commonly diagnosed in boys, though girls are less likely to be identified. Both ADHD and ADD can impact a child's social relationships, academic attainment, self-esteem, and family life. Symptoms often emerge in early childhood but become more noticeable at school age due to increased demands. Most diagnoses occur between ages 6 and 12, as younger children commonly show hyperactivity and inattention. Concern arises only if behaviour significantly differs from peers. The cause is unknown, though it tends to run in families, suggesting both genetic and environmental factors contribute.

What to look for

ADHD is linked to executive function deficits, affecting planning, organisation, and self-regulation. This can impact behaviour, including language and communication. Research shows 50-80% of children with ADHD also experience language or social communication difficulties, making these areas particularly challenging for many with the condition.

Difficulties include

- Short attention span and high distractibility
- Frequently making careless mistakes
- Forgetfulness and losing things often
- Difficulty listening to spoken information and instructions
- Difficulty planning tasks, organising themselves and equipment
- Talking excessively and dominating conversations
- Impulsiveness - acting without thinking first

Strategies to support learners with ADHD

- Students with ADHD benefit from a structured environment with familiar routines
- Clear boundaries will help students to manage impulsivity
- Provide short and specific instructions so that the young person knows exactly what he/she needs to do
- Provide lots of opportunities for movement breaks
- Limit distractions
- Task management boards and checklists for older pupils can help students to plan activities and remain on task

ADHD FOUNDATION
www.adhdfoundation.org.uk
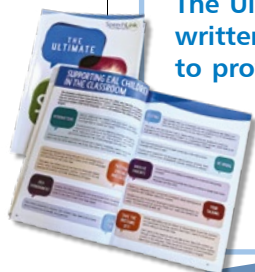
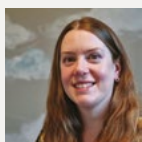**The Ultimate Guide to SLCN has been written by speech and language therapists to provide strategies and tips to help you support your SLCN learners.**

Access this essential online handbook for free when you sign up to The Link Community here:

SCAN ME

Supporting **LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT** with books

By **Louise Emerson**, specialist speech and language therapist

Definition

language

complex

Literacy

Context

Literacy and oral language skills go hand in hand. Much of the research in this area focusses on early years, but it is just as important a topic in secondary school. Here, students are exposed to an exponentially increasing variety and depth of vocabulary, texts and concepts across all subjects.

Reading, if accessible, is an excellent way to develop language. Not only does it provide context for new vocabulary and grammatical structures; it also provides a meaningful way to introduce different ways that people think and act, and why. Children and young people (CYP) can encounter more ideas and situations than they are likely to come across in their lives.

Most books can be used to develop a CYP's language skills, if not too far above their linguistic level. If a text is full of unfamiliar words, then the overall fluency of their reading will be disrupted meaning both their understanding of the flow of the story and their engagement (and therefore interest) is likely to be affected. When pupils come across unfamiliar words, it may also be helpful to encourage them to use a thesaurus rather than a dictionary. Dictionary definitions can use complex words themselves, whereas the thesaurus may have at least one other synonym that pupils recognise.

New vocabulary is all around us and we can use everyday, natural opportunities to learn. Looking on the back of a cereal packet or at a doctor's letter can be a chance to pick out important information and think about how they make sense of it or what the main message is. What strategies do your students have to help understand what information is important? Are there instructions that need to be followed up?

When reading a book or article as a class, it could be helpful to spilt students into groups, with everyone in the group given a different role. For example, in a group of four, one pupil could think about key questions to draw out the others' feelings and thoughts; one could highlight trickier paragraphs to read through again as a group; one could spot unfamiliar vocabulary and see if they could find some definitions; and one could summarise the main points in the text.

CYP with SLCN, including those with a diagnosis of developmental language disorder (DLD) need to hear words more often than their typically developing peers (see e.g., Gray, 2005, Zens et al., 2009). Findings also suggest that learning new words over several days is more effective than spending one day on them (see e.g., Riches et al., 2005) and therefore being able to return to the same resource, with the same vocabulary, is beneficial. This is where chapter books are incredibly useful. If they hold your students' interest, then they will be more focused: a chapter could be read each day over a fortnight.

Never underestimate the power of students' interests. You may be faced with a group who would rather read technically complex recipes or an instruction manual for fixing a controller than the most engaging work of fiction you have. These will contain topic specific vocabulary but will also contain vocabulary that occurs across contexts. For example, "combine" can be found across construction, baking and social contexts. (With the emphasis on the first syllable, it is also found in the farming world – perhaps an opportunity to naturally introduce the idea of stress words and homonyms.)

Another option is to choose (age-appropriate) wordless, or word-light books. There are books tackling difficult subjects which are specifically aimed at individuals with learning disabilities (see e.g., **Books Beyond Words** - www.booksbeyondwords.co.uk) but there are also wordless books aimed at older CYP. For example, **The Arrival** (Tan, 2014) which gives an account of a man who has moved to a new country in search of a better life; or **The Mysteries of Harris Burdick** (Van Allsburg, 2011) which is a series of pictures, each with a thought/discussion provoking caption. These books encourage CYP to share their thoughts without the pressure of 'being right', while at the same time providing adults with a chance to model vocabulary, grammar and inferencing skills. Other books with imaginative illustrations provide perfect pausing time as well as context for new words, for example **The Invention of Hugo Cabret** (Selznick, 2007).

Instilling a love of books for pleasure is the key to boosting language skills. Simply allowing the CYP to choose their own reading material will help. More enthusiasm for the material means they are more likely to push through and be curious about new vocabulary and concepts they encounter. Next time, we'll discuss some of the other ways that books and reading can be presented.
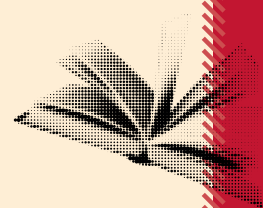
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Tan, S. (2014). *The Arrival*. Hodder Children's Books.

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VOICES OF REASON:
equipping students for thoughtful communication
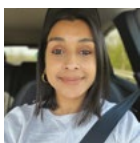
By **Meera Chudasama**, English, Media and Film Studies teacher, EPQ lead

In today's fast-moving world, students are surrounded by information from news, social media and daily conversations. This article shares activities to help support students to become better readers, speakers and listeners, while also supporting teachers to help develop students' speech, language and communication skills.

Which is best?

I take no credit for this activity—I picked it up from a colleague—but it's a great one as it gets students thinking, choosing and talking.

Firstly, give your students a list of choices from which they must choose which they think is the best, for example:

- ❓ Red or blue?
- ❓ Hot or cold?
- ❓ Sun or snow?
- ❓ Apples or oranges?

Once you've introduced the choices, you can model by saying something like, "*I actually think… is the best,*" and explain why. This small discussion is a great way to get students sharing their thoughts on very ordinary and inoffensive topics and an opportunity to observe how they build sentences and express personal preferences in conversation.

Hit the headlines

Getting students clued up on what's happening in the news is always a lovely starter to a lesson and a great way to get conversation going during tutor/form time. Grab the day's top FIVE headlines and get students sharing their opinions. Support them with phrases such as:

- 🙂 I agree…
- 🙁 I disagree with…
- 😧 I am shocked by…
- 😐 I feel that…
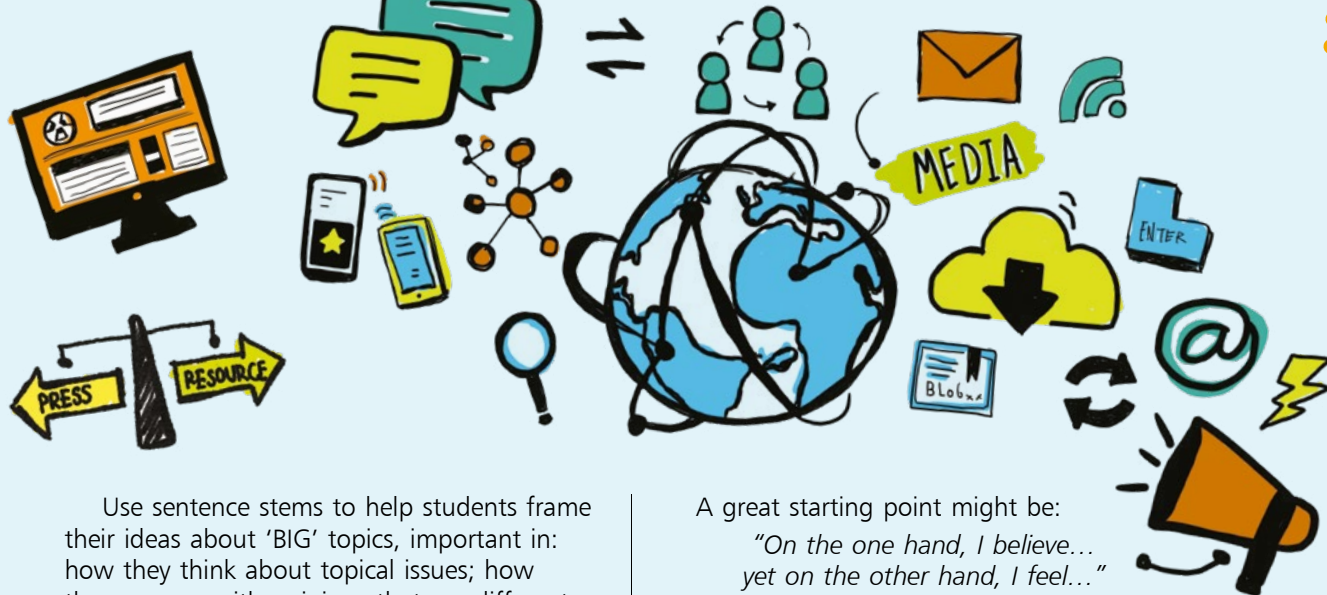
Use sentence stems to help students frame their ideas about 'BIG' topics, important in: how they think about topical issues; how they engage with opinions that are different from their own; and how they use their own experiences to inform their judgement.

BE OPEN in talking about how it's important to discuss your own thoughts and engage with opinions that are different from your own!

Take it one step further by playing devil's advocate—engage with an opposing opinion to help others question their perspective and gain a deeper understanding. This not only sharpens their critical thinking but also builds empathy and respect for different viewpoints.

Ssh! Silent debate!

A silent debate helps students who struggle to speak up by encouraging movement, critical thinking and engagement with diverse viewpoints.

So, how do you run one in class?

1 Print a range of thought-provoking statements on A4 paper and arrange them around the classroom

2 Ask students to visit each statement and write down whether they agree or disagree adding their reasons for thinking the way they do

3 Students then add ideas, experiences or respectful counterpoints to the ideas of other students

After all the statements have been engaged with, take time to read through some of the key ideas. Use the written ideas to start a verbal discussion in the classroom.

Another way of using the resources from a silent debate is to photocopy the annotated debate statements and use them as the foundation for a writing task.

Frameworks

One of the ways students can become more confident speakers is to embed key phrases and sentence structures into their everyday language. Using speaking frameworks can help students who struggle to phrase thoughts and ideas in a coherent way.

A great starting point might be:

"On the one hand, I believe…
yet on the other hand, I feel…"

This encourages students to explore different sides of an issue, while building their ability to express balanced, thoughtful opinions.

Here are some frameworks that could be used in the classroom:

Adding ideas:

✅ For example…
✅ Such as…

Opposing ideas:

✅ Others have stated that…
✅ It could be seen…

Developing ideas:

✅ Also…
✅ What's more…

Creating an expert!

Students may struggle to speak up when they feel they don't know enough about a topic. If they lack background knowledge, forming an opinion or engaging in discussion becomes a real challenge.

Use your current topic as a springboard for exploring a wider range of ideas, perspectives and vocabulary.

But how can you support students in truly mastering what they know?

✅ First 10 minutes of the lesson: read new information related to the topic from an informative text

✅ Last 10 minutes: share something that they learned that surprised them, challenged their thinking or that they think others might not know

I hope this article has got you thinking about different ways of embedding structured talk in the classroom through semi-unstructured ways. As with any classroom discussion, it's important to be able to build student rapport and use this to engage with real, honest opinions about the world. This way students become informed citizens, engaging in cultural products more critically.

@MeeraChudasama

One TA to another

?

Having a **successful school trip**

By **Claire Chambers,** The Link editor

Whether you're braving a one-day outing or embarking on the bold adventure of a residential trip, you already know school trips take military-grade planning, the patience of a saint and possibly a backup career in crisis management. Of course, the aim is to create enriching experiences that enhance learning—but let's be honest, they can also induce panic (and not just in the students).

When I worked in a secondary school in Kent, some of our students had quite limited life experiences and many hadn't had opportunities that took them out of the county. A trip to London—say to a museum—was both thrilling and terrifying. For them, London was a place full of celebrities and the royal family, but also guns and danger.

Here are a few tips I picked up that might help to make the day a success for your students with SLCN.

Before the trip

Take time to prep your more anxious students, especially those with SLCN. Don't assume that because they were in the class/year group briefing about the trip that they have fully understood what is happening – there was probably a lot of information given out.

Show them online where they will be going and what it will be like, create a visual timetable of the day, along with a simple checklist: What to wear, what to bring – what NOT to bring!

Talk through the purpose of the trip and what they will be doing, e.g., to help them understand the Peasants' Revolt. They might be joining in activities, watching people acting out history and collecting facts to talk about or use in schoolwork.

Pre-teach the key vocabulary they might encounter, e.g., empire, peasantry, reformation, trade and talk through possible scenarios—"If it rains, we will..." or "If we get lost, here's what we'll do."

Back at school

Hopefully you will have taken lots of photos throughout the day. These are priceless when it comes to getting students to talk or write about their day without resorting to, "It was fine." Bonus: they make great *memory-making* material for future leavers' assemblies.

With proper preparation, the trip can be an enjoyable, educational experience, both for you and your students!

On the day

Expect the unexpected. Someone will forget everything. Pack:

- ✓ Pens, paper, pencils
- ✓ Carrier bags (for wet clothes and rogue sandwiches)
- ✓ Water and cups
- ✓ Scissors, tweezers, gloves, toothbrush (for dog poo stuck in trainers), sanitiser, tissues, loo roll
- ✓ Sunscreen (because someone *will* burn on a cloudy day)
- ✓ Portable phone charger
- ✓ Biscuits (check allergies)

For yourself: Paracetamol, Rescue Remedy, a sunhat, and possibly an escape plan.

The Link Live Speech & Language Day

LinkLive

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Cost: Free for Link Community members

ABIGAIL HAWKINS

SEN consultant, author and advocate
Founder of SENsible SENCO

Find out more about Abigail here:
www.sensiblesenco.org.uk

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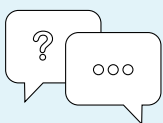
Occupational therapist
Founder of School Sensory Solutions

Find out more about Ali here:
www.tinyurl.com/3de475jb

MIKEY AKERS

Founder of Mikey's Wish Foundation, raising awareness of apraxia of speech

Find out more about Mikey's work here:
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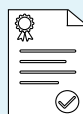
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FREE FOR THE LINK COMMUNITY

SENSORY CIRCUITS
in Secondary Schools

By **Ali Neal**, specialist occupational therapist

Many, if not all, schools are recognising the benefits of sensory circuits for their pupils, but most of the resources and activities are aimed at primary school pupils leaving secondary school staff asking:

"How do we run sensory circuits in secondary schools?"

So, in this article, I'm going to give you practical tips that you can implement today, plus a free circuit to get you started. First a bit of theory:

Sensory circuits are a series of activities that you can do with an individual or a group of pupils to give them opportunities for movement breaks and to aid their regulation. The overall aim is that the circuit will help students focus, be centred and be ready to learn in class.

Circuits can be carried out anywhere, but often the hall is the best place as there is more space and you can utilise some PE equipment.

Traditional circuit activities fall into one of three categories – alerting, organising or calming.

❶ **Alerting activities** tend to be fast-paced and involve movement of the head. They might include spinning, going upside down and rapid start stop movements like shuttle runs

❷ **Organising activities** tend to involve a young person having to think and plan their movements and maybe multitask, for example balancing whilst throwing and catching

❸ **Calming** activities tend to involve deep pressure and slow or rocking movements

The idea is to do alerting activities first, followed by organising activities and end with calming activities so the student returns to class calm and organised. Not all pupils need to do all three stages - sometimes it's clear that students need to alert or need to calm - sometimes you may not know where to start. In this instance I have a magic solution for you:

The single best way to help a pupil self-regulate is to harness their magic sense, their sense of proprioception.
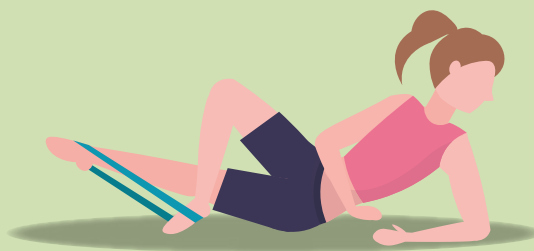
Proprioception is our awareness of our own body, where it is, how it moves and how much force it is applying. But it does so much more; proprioception not only alerts and organises us but it also has an overriding calming effect on our nervous system – it does everything!

Our proprioceptors are located in our muscles, they are working to some degree all of the time but much more so when we work our muscles against resistance – to pull, push, lift, carry. So, to help students regulate and manage their anxiety, stress and sensory overload all we need to do is encourage them to move more. Many of the strategies out there are focused on younger pupils and it can be harder to meet the needs of our teenage population; so, on a practical level, what might this look like with our neurodiverse or SEN students who may not wish to feel singled out for intervention?

Sensory circuits are still great for our young adults but we need to do them slightly differently. Equipment you might use include slam ball (those weighted balls with a soft shell that you can throw to the ground), bosu (think top 1/3 of a gym ball on a flat base – you can bounce on it or turn it over and use as a wobble board), TheraBand or Pilates band to pull and work the muscles, shuttle runs, dribbling footballs, or using a gym ball to run, bounce and pass like a

> "The single best way to help a pupil self-regulate is to harness their magic sense, their sense of proprioception."

basketball. You can also try following more of a HIIT or exercise type structure and perhaps invite your pupils to find an exercise instructor on TikTok that they want to follow – there are some great exercise ideas out there for free and ideal for the teenage population. Remember fast, stop-start, spinning and going upside down will make an activity alerting, whilst multi-tasking, thinking and planning makes it organising.

To gain calming input I find it helpful to have a nurture or sensory room that the student can access that's a bit more grown up. Gaming rockers are fantastic – the ones that sit on the floor and give a rocking motion are really regulating, but also very age appropriate. Weighted blankets are still popular. Music is the all-time teenage way of regulating so perhaps allow music to be played. Going for a walk is also very calming and helpful. If you need a debrief or to chat then actually chatting whilst walking means you are not face-to-face with your student, and many of them find it much easier to talk this way.

When in doubt use proprioception.
When in doubt, remember that magic muscle sense and teach your pupils to harness it for regulation. To get you started I'm giving you a free download of 8 organising activities you can do with secondary school pupils.

SCAN FOR FREE ACTIVITIES

Ali Neal is a specialist occupational therapist with advanced training in sensory processing. She runs School Sensory Solutions which provides regular and cost effective training for all educators supporting SEN and neurodivergent pupils in schools via an online learning platform. Ali prides herself in finding solutions to everyday problems experienced by children and young people at school that actually work and supporting teachers to incorporate these in their already busy days.

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Tel: 07853 847381

Facebook: School Sensory Solutions with Ali Neal.

Instagram: School Sensory Solutions

Linked in: School Sensory Solutions with Ali Neal

SECONDARY LANGUAGE LINK – A REVIEW

By **Abigail Hawkins,** SEN consultant, author and advocate

With over 30 years' experience in SEND leadership and inclusion, Abigail has supported schools nationally, and founded SENsible SENCO, the UK's largest online SENCo support network. She is known for her no-nonsense approach, deep compassion for SENCos, and her commitment to raising the profile of SEND leadership in schools. She has trained thousands of professionals and reviewed dozens of provisions.

We were thrilled when Abigail agreed to review our speech and language assessment and intervention tool - Secondary Language Link. Here's what she thought:

" The Secondary Language Link package by Speech & Language Link is an innovative and comprehensive tool designed to support secondary school students (aged 11-14) with language and communication needs. Its focus on this often-overlooked age group is particularly relevant in the UK, where many students with SLCN are only being identified later in their education due to challenges such as the impact of COVID-19, reduced funding, and limited access to early intervention services. This package helps schools address these challenges by combining standardised assessments, targeted interventions, and staff training in a cohesive, user-friendly system.

The standardised assessment is a core feature of Secondary Language Link, enabling schools to efficiently identify language and communication difficulties that might otherwise go unnoticed. It focuses on areas particularly relevant to secondary students, such as understanding complex instructions, processing figurative language, and navigating social interactions. The assessment is accessible and engaging, incorporating video and audio elements to minimise literacy demands. This ensures it is inclusive of students with additional learning needs and provides an accurate picture of their strengths and difficulties.

Following the assessment, the package offers targeted interventions delivered through video-based group sessions. These sessions use an approach inspired by escape rooms, where students must solve or complete a series of tasks to progress. This design encourages collaboration, problem-solving, and practical application of language skills. The tasks are set within real-world problem-solving scenarios, ensuring relevance and engagement for secondary-aged learners. From my experience, these interventions are not only well-structured and easy to deliver but also highly effective at maintaining student motivation.

" THEY LOVED IT!! A GROUP OF YEAR 7 STUDENTS SAID THE ASSESSMENT WAS FANTASTIC. IF ASKED TO SIT AGAIN THEY WOULD. A BRILLIANT RESOURCE."

THE HALIFAX ACADEMY, CALDERDALE
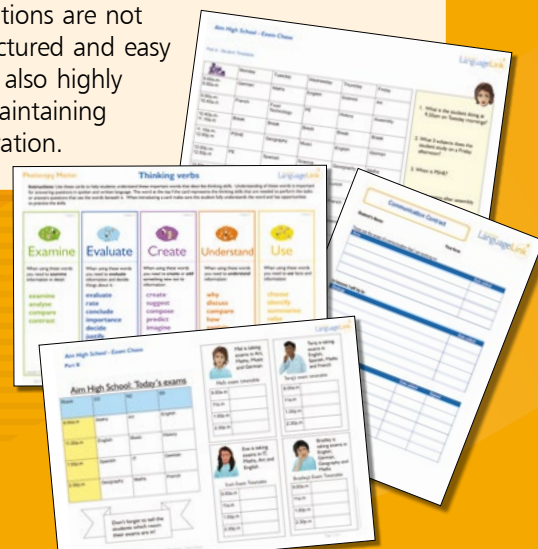
The package also includes a comprehensive staff training toolkit, which equips teachers, SENCos, and support staff with practical strategies to create communication-friendly classrooms. This aligns with the UK's SEND Code of Practice, which highlights the importance of building capacity within schools to meet the needs of all learners. The training resources are clear, practical, and designed to instil confidence in educators, ensuring that the strategies are readily implemented in day-to-day teaching.
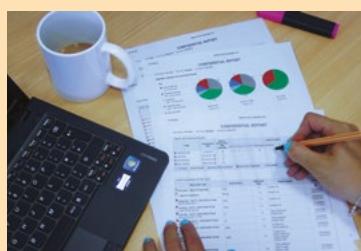
One of the most valuable features of the package is its progress tracking system. This enables schools to monitor the effectiveness of interventions and make informed adjustments to their support strategies. The ability to measure impact is particularly important in the UK context, where schools are increasingly expected to provide evidence of the outcomes of their SEND provision during Ofsted inspections.

The package also supports students learning English as an additional language (EAL) including those who may have co-occurring SLCN. This feature means that EAL learners with underlying communication difficulties are not overlooked, ensuring inclusivity in multicultural schools. Its adaptability allows schools to meet the needs of all learners while fostering equitable access to support.

As someone experienced in using ed-tech products, I found **Secondary Language Link** to be intuitive and easy to use. Its seamless integration into school systems, combined with its practical tools and engaging interventions, makes it an invaluable resource for addressing the communication needs of secondary students. The thoughtfully designed assessments, interventions, and training resources ensure that it delivers meaningful and measurable results for both students and staff. **"**

"
THE SCREEN PROVIDES A GOOD STARTING POINT AND IS QUICK & EASY TO USE. CAN SCREEN A WHOLE CLASS IN ONE HOUR AND LEARNERS ARE IDENTIFIED THAT MIGHT OTHERWISE HAVE SLIPPED UNDER THE RADAR. POST-INTERVENTION SCORES REVEAL THAT MOST PUPILS IMPROVE. THIS IS ALSO NOTICED IN CLASS."

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ASK A THERAPIST

By **Alison Fowle**, specialist speech and language therapist

Q. I repeated the Secondary Language Link screen with one of my students today. We've put intervention in place for this student and were hoping to see an improvement when comparing the first screen with the recent one, but they've achieved similar standard scores. Does the fact that the standard score hadn't changed mean that they haven't made progress?

This is a great question!

A. Let's start by thinking about what the Secondary Language Link screen is designed to do. We know that language difficulties are challenging to spot through observation alone, which can lead to students with language difficulties being missed or identified late. The goal of the Language Link screen is to help you to:

1 **identify** all students who have difficulty understanding language.

2 **decide** which students would benefit from having support to develop their language skills, either in the classroom or through small group interventions.

3 **identify** students who may need to be discussed with your local specialist services.

Your question suggests that you're attempting to use the Secondary Language Link screen as a progress measure. It's important to note that this tool is not designed to measure progress, and using it as such can be misleading. The screen identifies the level of a student's understanding of language in relation to their peers and highlights areas of need. This is why we recommend completing the screen only once a year, at the start of the academic year, to identify whether a student would benefit from language support and determine what form that support should take.

It's also helpful to consider what standard scores represent. Standard scores compare a student's performance to a wider population of their peers. Even if a student has made progress with their language skills, their standard score may remain unchanged if their progress is in line with that of their peers. This doesn't mean the student hasn't improved; it just means that their relative position compared to peers hasn't shifted.

The aim of intervention should always be to improve a student's overall language skills, not just to improve their score on a particular

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test. When it comes to measuring the impact of interventions, it's vital to use tools that reflect progress in functional language skills, the outcomes of interventions, and the student's ability to access learning in the classroom.

The progress measures available in the Secondary Language Link packages include:

- **The Skills Check** – completed by students at the beginning and end of each intervention group and is a test of knowledge for baseline and progress.

- **The Communication Card** – completed by students to evaluate their knowledge and skills at the end of each session.

- **Session tracking** – completed by the group leader as part of each session to inform how effective the session was.

- **The Communication Contract** – completed by students after the intervention block to consolidate learning and support generalisation.

In summary then, the Secondary Language Link screen is a great starting point for identifying students with language needs and identifying appropriate support. However, rescreening is not the best way to assess whether an intervention has made a meaningful impact. Instead, focus on pre- and post-intervention progress measures and real-world improvements in the student's language skills. Look for changes in their classroom engagement, confidence in communication, and ability to participate in discussions and learning activities.

Try the Secondary Language Link assessment with a **4-WEEK FREE TRIAL**. Just scan the QR code.

SCAN ME

The link between
SLCN & SEMH
at secondary age

By **Kate Freeman, consultant**
— speech and language in education

Is there really a link?

People are often surprised about the link between speech, language, and communication needs (SLCN) and social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs. However, these two domains are deeply intertwined:

SLCN issues can lead to feelings of frustration, isolation, or rejection. Over time, these challenges can erode self-esteem, contribute to behavioural outbursts or foster social withdrawal. If left unchecked, these difficulties can spiral into more significant SEMH needs, affecting a young person's ability to thrive academically and socially.

Consider, for example, a student who cannot find the right words quickly enough to articulate their thoughts clearly or struggles to understand nuanced instructions like, *"Do you think it's possible for us to be quiet for more than 10 minutes?"*.

Language is central to how we process emotions, build relationships and navigate the world. For young people who struggle with communication, finding their way through the social complexities of school life and friendships can be profoundly difficult.

Research confirms that young people with mental health challenges are more likely to have unidentified or unsupported SLCN (Hollo et al, 2014 found that 81% of children and young people with social, emotional and mental health needs have significant unidentified language deficits).

What can we do about it?

One of the most significant barriers is the 'hidden' nature of SLCN with needs often hard to spot or easily misinterpreted. Students' difficulties may be miscategorised as lack of effort, behavioural issues or general disinterest,

rather than recognising an underlying communication need. Similarly, some young people develop coping mechanisms that mask their struggles, making it even harder for staff to identify the root cause.

Early identification is therefore crucial. By understanding the subtle signs of SLCN (difficulty following instructions, limited vocabulary, or challenges with social interactions), staff can intervene early. Screening and intervention tools such as *Secondary Language Link* can be used to identify and support SLCN before these issues escalate into SEMH needs.

Staff also play a pivotal role in creating environments that support both SLCN and SEMH. Here are important factors for all staff to think about:

❶ Promoting inclusive communication practices: Use clear, accessible language and provide visual aids, gestures and repetition to support understanding. Pre-teach key vocabulary and encourage all students to ask questions and clarify their understanding without fear of judgment

❷ Fostering social skills development: Integrate into the curriculum opportunities for students to build social and communication skills. Small group activities, role-play and peer mentoring can help students practise and refine their interactions

❸ Accessing staff training: Access available training to develop vital skills for addressing SLCN. Accessing CPD can help staff recognise the behavioural and emotional signs that indicate an underlying communication difficulty

❹ Enabling evidenced interventions: Delivering tailored interventions that have a strong evidence-base helps develop skills for the classroom, as well as social situations

❺ Prioritising emotional wellbeing: Recognise the emotional impact of communication difficulties and provide opportunities for students to express feelings. Having a trusted adult or access to a pastoral support team can help students feel heard and supported

Ironically, for young people (and adults) with mental health needs, support to address anxiety etc. is mainly available through talking therapies, so students struggling with talking and understanding are doubly disadvantaged.

Focused provision for SLCN also, therefore, helps students to access any psychological support to meet their mental health needs.

A whole school approach

Supporting SLCN can contribute to a more inclusive school culture. When all students feel understood and valued, it fosters a sense of belonging that is essential for positive mental health outcomes.

To fully identify and support SLCN, secondary schools should consider the following practical steps:

✅ **Screening and assessment:** Implement regular screening to identify students with potential SLCN. Use statistically robust assessment tools that comprehensively evaluate communication skills

✅ **Individualised support plans:** Develop tailored plans that address both academic and emotional needs. Regularly review and adapt plans as students progress

✅ **CPD:** Access courses as a whole school or for key teachers, TAs or SENCos. Many of these are available online or take the form of self-directed learning

✅ **Parental engagement:** Work closely with families to understand students' communication challenges and ensure consistency in approaches and support between home and school

✅ **Raise awareness:** Organise workshops or assemblies to educate students about communication difficulties and promote peer empathy and understanding

Conclusion

Recognising and addressing the link between SLCN and SEMH needs is a moral and educational imperative. By fully identifying and supporting SLCN, schools not only improve students' communication skills but also safeguard their emotional wellbeing and mental health. This holistic approach sets young people on a path to greater resilience, confidence and success, both in school and beyond.

welcome to The Link

SECONDARY LANGUAGE LINK IS A FINALIST!

SECONDARY LanguageLink

We are thrilled to announce that Secondary Language Link is a finalist in this year's ERA Awards in the *Special Education Resource or Equipment* category.

So far, this academic year, schools using the **Secondary Language Link** package have screened an impressive 38,320 students using its innovative assessment tool.

If you share their passion for ensuring no student slips through the net - take a free trial of Secondary Language Link using the QR code.

era 2025 **FINALIST**

FREE TRIAL

SupaJam

supajam WANDSWORTH

SupaJam is a group of specialist post-16 music colleges in Swanley, Canterbury, Brighton, and Wandsworth, offering tailored placements for young people aged 16-25 with an EHCP.

We support students who have struggled in mainstream education, providing small class sizes and an inclusive environment. Students need a clear passion for music and interest in the music industry to enrol.

Our curriculum includes RSL Creative Industries Diplomas in music performance, production, event management and marketing, plus functional skills and GCSEs. Students also gain work experience, life skills, and attend music events

Please contact outreach@supajam-education.org for a private tour or to book a place on our next Open Day. We can't wait to meet you!

Dates for your diary

We're booked up for events for the rest of the academic year and gearing up to hit the ground running in 25/26. Here's where you can find us!

12TH JUNE
SEND Conference Sandy Park, Exeter

18TH JUNE
West Sussex SENCO Conference, Bognor Regis

3RD JULY
Virtual School and SEND Conference, Bedford

4TH JULY
nasen Live, Birmingham

3RD OCTOBER
National Education Show, Cardiff

10-11TH OCTOBER
Tes SEND Show 2025, London

17TH OCTOBER
DLD Awareness Day

Community news

New Project

Speech & Language Link is in the process of developing a product to support Medway in Kent's Youth Offending Team in the identification and support of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).

Young people with SLCN are often identified as having behavioural needs without their SLCN being identified or supported, which can lead to routes out of education, and into the criminal justice system. **With 79.8% of people receiving a custodial sentence identified with SEN at some point in education (2021 Census data), it is vital that these needs are recognised.**

The product will consist of a strengths and difficulties screen along with practical advice, interventions, and resources for staff to help their young people, accompanied by training for staff members to raise awareness of and boost skills in identifying and supporting SLCN. Targeted at 14-18 years, the screen and interventions will be developed over time to share more widely with secondary schools as a follow-on from **Secondary Language Link.**

The Link magazine is evolving

At Speech & Language Link, we're dedicated to supporting you in helping pupils with speech, language and communication needs. We also understand that many schools are looking for more sustainable ways to access resources—like reading *The Link* magazine online to reduce paper use.

While we use carbon-balanced paper and have always intended *The Link* to be a valuable, lasting resource, we've been thinking carefully about how to move forward in a more eco-conscious way—while still keeping the magazine free for schools that want it.

Starting from next spring we will continue to send The Link magazine by post to the SENCo in every school subscribed to a Secondary Language Link package, as well as to any schools who have staff who are Link Community members. This means from spring 2026 you'll need to be either a free member of The Link Community or a subscriber to Secondary Language Link for your school to continue receiving a free copy of the magazine.

There's nothing you need to do right now. You'll receive your autumn issue as usual later this year, which will include more details about how you can continue to enjoy the printed version—or make the switch to digital if you prefer.

SCAN ME

Join the Link Community here

Your free LINK COMMUNITY MEMBERSHIP - what's included?

SCAN ME

RESOURCES
Downloadable speech and language resources and activities.

TALKAWAYS PODCAST
The latest podcast from therapists Juliet and Alison.

THE LINK LIVE ON-DEMAND
Revisit sessions from The Link Live archive.

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO SLCN
The ultimate speech and language handbook.

THE LINK LIVE 2025 TICKET
Free ticket for The Link Live Speech & Language Day 2025.

PARENT PORTAL
Add our Parent/Carer support area to your website.

STAY IN TOUCH WITH THE LINK COMMUNITY SPEECH & LANGUAGE NEWSLETTER.

THE LINK MAGAZINE LIBRARY
Unlimited access to all back copies of The Link magazine.

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Stay supported in your work with pupils with SLCN:
we're here for you every step of the way!
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