

The Link

SECONDARY



THE SPEECH & LANGUAGE MAGAZINE FOR SCHOOLS

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Understanding and supporting
speech difficulties in secondary —
turn to page 4

ISSUE
8
2026

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PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR
SUPPORTING PDA LEARNERS



LANGUAGE, COMMUNICATION
AND LITERACY



WHAT DOES 'UNIVERSAL
SUPPORT' REALLY MEAN FOR
SLCN AT SECONDARY?

Dear SENCo,

Welcome to this issue of *The Link Secondary!*

With 2026 being the **National Year of Reading**, we're excited to be joining the celebration. At **Speech & Language Link**, we've pledged our support to help inspire schools and communities to get involved and we'd love you to be part of it too. You can find out more about the campaign at: <https://goallin.org.uk/>

In this issue, we're taking a closer look at the relationship between **language and literacy**. For all students, strong language skills are the foundation that reading and writing grow from. On **page 8**, our resident specialist speech and language therapist, **Yin Collighan**, explains why understanding the link between language, communication

and literacy success has never been more important.

If you're looking to spark a love of reading in your students, the team at **Every Cherry** share some practical and uplifting ideas on **page 16** – perfect for weaving into everyday interactions or whole-school approaches.

On **page 4**, this issue's **Ask a therapist** features **Emma Higgins**, one of our specialist speech and language therapists, who guides us through the range of speech sound difficulties that can still appear at secondary school, along with supportive strategies you can use straight away.

With stories about rising behaviour challenges continuing in schools, **Clare Truman** invites us to consider whether some of these difficulties may be linked to **PDA (Pathological**

Demand Avoidance). Her article offers clear insight and practical strategies that can make a real difference for PDA learners - it's well worth a read, see page 6.

And of course, we can't forget **The Link Live**, now just a couple of months away. If you haven't grabbed your free ticket yet, now's a great time. Head to **pages 14-15** for the full lineup and booking details.

I hope to see you there on 30th April!

Have a good term,
Claire Chambers



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

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SIGN-SUPPORTED BSL



Excerpted from The Ultimate Guide to SLCN
By **Sophie Mustoe-Playfair** and **Louise Burton**, specialist speech and language therapists at Speech & Language Link.

DEAFNESS

Deafness, sometimes referred to as hearing loss, is when one or more parts of the ear aren't working effectively. Being able to hear is central to many individuals' health and wellbeing and is crucial for the development of speech, spoken language and communication skills.

Types of deafness

Hearing loss can occur at any time over a person's life, from birth through to old age. It can affect one or both ears, to the same or a different degree, and can be stable or fluctuate. Children can have a congenital loss, where they are born with deafness or it can be acquired, for example due to illness or injury.

Impact of deafness

Deaf children are at risk of the following difficulties:

- Difficulties with **speech and (spoken) language** development, with understanding of vocabulary and concepts a particular weakness. Deafness in children can have a significant impact on the acquisition of language and speech sound skills
- Difficulty **socialising** with others. Group conversations can be very challenging as it is easy to lose track of the conversation
- Poor **attention** and concentration. Deaf individuals can tire easily due to the increased concentration needed to focus on the speaker and use strategies such as lip-reading to understand
- Difficulties with **multi-tasking**, for example being able to take notes or complete a piece of work while listening and/or lip-reading at the same time
- Reduced educational **attainment**
- Increased risk of **mental health** difficulties

Strategies

Every deaf pupil is different and will need different strategies for supporting them.

Many of the general strategies for supporting children with SLCN will be applicable for deaf students. Here are some specific strategies:

Communicating with deaf pupils

- 💡 Find out how the student is communicating using spoken language, BSL, Sign-Supported English or a mixture of these
- 💡 Gain their attention before speaking and face them when you're talking
- 💡 Use visual cues to support spoken language
- 💡 Try and ensure that only one person is speaking at a time
- 💡 Make sure that your face is visible and well-lit

Supporting speech and language development and access to the curriculum

- ✔ Provide pre- and post-teaching of vocabulary and concepts
- ✔ Use visuals to back up spoken information
- ✔ Give extra time for students to be able to take notes
- ✔ Adapt activities to include tasks that do not rely solely on listening or lip-reading
- ✔ Speak clearly and naturally, as speaking slowly or too loudly makes lip-reading much more difficult

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:



ASK A Therapist



By **Emma Higgins**, specialist speech and language therapist at Speech & Language Link

Q: A few Years 7 and 8 students have been flagged by staff as having speech difficulties. Can I use Speech Link to assess them?



We are often asked by secondary schools whether they can purchase Speech Link for pupils where staff have noticed there is something different about their talking. The short answer is “no”, we don’t recommend Speech Link for secondary schools.

Before I go into the reasons why, here’s a reminder of what is meant by ‘speech’ and ‘language’.

Speech is the physical production of sounds to make words, phrases and sentences using the mouth, tongue, and voice.

Language is the system of words (vocabulary), grammar and sentences we use, and need to understand, to communicate.

What is Speech Link?

Developed by our Speech & Language Link therapists, Speech Link is our sound screening and intervention package for children aged 4 to 8 years.

The screening establishes how well a child can say sounds at the beginning and end of single words (e.g., **cat**, **mouse**). Where appropriate, it then provides speech sound programmes to support the child’s speech progress.

So why can’t we use it in secondary schools?

Most children learn all English speech sounds by the age of 6-7 and usually by the time pupils reach secondary school, any issues will have resolved. However, some children will continue to have difficulties with their speech. This can be due to various factors, including:

- Hearing loss
- Childhood apraxia of speech (difficulty planning and coordinating the movements needed to speak clearly)
- Stroke, traumatic brain injury and genetic conditions

What this might look like:

- Difficulty making correct movements for specific sounds (articulation)

- Using the wrong sounds, missing sounds or putting sounds in the wrong place in words (phonological difficulties)
- Long-standing errors with particular sounds that are difficult to change (entrenched speech sounds)
- Inconsistent errors when saying the same word
- Starting a word, stopping and starting again

Speech Link is designed to support children with developmental speech sound difficulties and is therefore intended for younger children, rather than secondary-aged pupils.

The importance of specialist input

It’s so important to seek specialist advice for any pupil presenting with difficulty with their speech at secondary school as this can impact literacy development, overall academic achievement, as well as the young person’s self-esteem if effective support is not put in place.

If students struggle with speech at secondary age, they are likely to need specialist support from a speech and language therapist (SaLT). The SaLT can assess if the difficulty is linked to an underlying speech sound, motor or language difficulty and can provide targeted intervention/support.

When it looks like speech, but isn’t

Speech difficulties are not the only reason why a pupil might sound unclear. Difficulties that can be mistaken as speech issues include:

Dysfluency (stammering or stuttering) – affects a person’s ability to produce ‘fluent’ speech. A dysfluent person might:

- Repeat sounds (“b-b-b-b-but”), parts of words (“I wa-wa-want...”) or whole words (you-you-you-you said I...“)



- Make sounds longer (“I llllllike dogs”) or blocking of sounds (silent “ ____yes” and audible “I l-like...”)
- Display tension in their face, or body movements
- Avoid talking or saying certain words

If you have concerns regarding a student’s fluency, check if they are already known to the local speech and language service. If not, a discussion with them would be strongly advised.

Voice difficulties – affect the pitch, volume, tone or quality of voice. You might observe the following in a person with voice difficulties:

- ⚠ Rough, hoarse, weak, tight, tense or breathy voice quality
- ⚠ Their voice is unusually quiet or loud
- ⚠ Their voice sounds unusually high/low in pitch
- ⚠ Effortful voice use, with visible tension in shoulders, throat or neck
- ⚠ Their voice fades or disappears after long periods of use

If a young person is experiencing difficulties with their voice that last over three weeks, share your concerns with their parents who can take their

child to their GP to discuss this further or contact your local speech and language therapy service for advice.

Selective mutism (SM) – also known as situational mutism, is an anxiety-based condition where a young person can speak in some situations and environments, but is unable to in others. A person with SM might:

- Have a good understanding of language and can talk normally when they are comfortable (e.g., certain situations and environments)
- Have difficulty with making and maintaining friendships
- Avoid certain lessons or school in general

If you are concerned a student might have SM, check if they are already known to the local speech and language service and follow any advice given. If not, a discussion with them would be strongly advised.

By secondary school, intelligibility difficulties can have a range of underlying causes and may not always be speech-based. A specialist-informed approach helps schools consider the full picture and make informed decisions about the next steps, helping young people to communicate with confidence.

For more information and strategies to support students with speech, language and communication needs, join The Link Community.



PRACTICAL STRATEGIES

for supporting PDA learners



By **Clare Truman**, director of Spectrum Space Education, Training and Consultancy

Pathological demand avoidance (PDA) is considered by many to be a profile of autism. It is characterised by high levels of anxiety surrounding demands, leading PDA people to resist and avoid the ordinary demands of life. This is not just avoiding direct demands (what other people tell you to do) but also avoiding unwritten expectations (subtle or silent demands) and self-imposed demands (things you want to do). PDA is often described as a drive for autonomy and maximising autonomy is key to supporting PDA learners to thrive.

The first step when supporting a PDA learner, is to reduce the number of demands they are presented with in the first place. I find that demands can usually be divided into three categories:



NOT NEEDED DEMANDS

 Some of the demands of a school day can be removed altogether. It may not matter what colour pen a learner uses, they may not need to be reminded that the football team is meeting at lunchtime, or asked whether they have brought their football boots. If, when you look at the learner's day, any of the demands they are being presented with seem unimportant, there could be a great benefit and reduction in anxiety if those demands are simply removed.

NEGOTIABLE DEMANDS

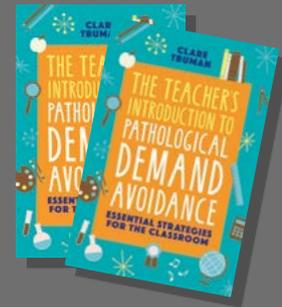
 Most demands in the school day are negotiable demands. How much classwork gets completed, where in the building learning takes place, how new learning is recorded. All these things can be negotiated and presented in a more PDA-friendly way:

-  **Invite instead of instruct:** a phrase such as, "I wonder how many nutritionally balanced meals we can make out of these ingredients" is an invitation. The sentence, "Make a vegetable curry" is an instruction. Invitations are less demanding than instructions.
-  **Offer choices:** anything that increases the learner's autonomy is valuable. If a lesson includes a multiple-choice activity and some creative writing, PDA learners may want to choose which order they do those things in. Similarly, learners may be offered a choice between presenting their learning as a written report, visual presentation or mind map.
-  **Welcome the learner's ideas:** if we focus on learning targets rather than learning tasks



READ
MORE
ABOUT
PDA

Clare's book, *The Teacher's Introduction to Pathological Demand Avoidance: Essential Strategies for the Classroom* is available in bookshops. Clare is director of Spectrum Space (www.spectrumspace.co.uk) which provides distance learning programmes for PDA young people who cannot attend school and training and consultancy for schools and education professionals.



we often find there are opportunities for all learners (including the PDA learner) to bring in their own ideas. If the learning target is to use alliteration effectively, you could offer learners the option to write on any topic of their choice to demonstrate that skill. I often put a line at the bottom of worksheets and instruction sheets that says: "You may have your own idea" and invite learners to share their own ideas for activities that would meet the learning target in the space underneath.

😊 **Say 'Yes' where we can:** often we say, "No" when what we mean is, "Yes, but...". When a learner asks if they can leave the classroom we may say, "No, you can't walk around school alone" when we could instead say, "Yes, but when Ms Smith comes back because having an adult with you is a safety rule" or "Yes, your choices are the library or the study hub". By saying 'yes' where we can, we are again maximising the learner's autonomy.

😊 **Respect 'No' if we can:** often distress (and sometimes distressed behaviour) is seen when a PDA learner has already told us that they are not able to cope with a demand, but the demand has been restated. They have said, "No, I'm not doing algebra today" and we have insisted that completing the algebra is essential. If we can respond instead with curiosity; finding out why algebra doesn't feel doable today and what we could do to either remove those barriers or find a replacement learning/regulating activity, we avoid increasing the anxiety and distress the PDA learner is experiencing.

NON-NEGOTIABLE DEMANDS

🗑️ Some demands are non-negotiable. These will generally be demands related to safety such as not climbing on high things and not hurting themselves or other people. Non-negotiable demands need to be kept to an absolute minimum. If learners are struggling to follow even these minimal non-negotiable rules, it is important that we offer support to follow them rather than punishments for breaking them. Having a problem-solving conversation about this would be a good approach. An effective way to open these conversations is to say something along the lines of, "This is a legal rule. What can you do and what can I do to make it easier to follow?" and then work together to find strategies that would reduce the learner's anxiety to a level where they have the capacity to meet those non-negotiable demands.

IN SUMMARY

PDA learners often have a difficult educational journey, but by being thoughtful about which demands we prioritise and remaining focused on maximising the learner's autonomy, we can enable PDA learners to thrive in school and beyond.



LANGUAGE, COMMUNICATION... AND LITERACY



By **Yin Collighan**, specialist speech and language therapist at Speech & Language Link

What springs to mind when you think about literacy? Many teachers think about reading comprehension and writing for different purposes. But look under every sentence and passage and you'll find spoken language and communication. These critical skills underpin each pupil's ability to access the curriculum.

Expectations for literacy are increasing across the curriculum, with one major change being the introduction of the Year 8 reading test. Without a doubt, understanding the link between language, communication and literacy success has never been more important.

Transitioning to secondary school

For most students, literacy foundations are well-established by the time pupils arrive in Year 7. Unfortunately, a surprising number of students start secondary school with language and communication needs (LCN) that are either unidentified or have become pronounced, as academic language demands increase.

Everyday chat is speedy and dynamic. It's difficult to spot some of these issues in discussion, yet they become more visible when children are asked, for example, to read complicated texts, analyse arguments or explain their reasoning in writing.

Literacy difficulties are often the visible tip of an underlying language iceberg, with 58% of children who meet the criteria of dyslexia also meeting the criteria for developmental language disorder (Snowling et al., 2019).

Understanding of language fuels reading comprehension

Understanding of verbal language is essential for developing reading comprehension. Pupils need:

- ✓ **A wide, robust vocabulary** to understand subject terminology, figurative language and the nuances of academic text

- ✓ **An understanding of increasingly complex word and sentence structure** to comprehend secondary reading materials
- ✓ **Inference and deduction skills**, which depend heavily on verbal language, knowledge about the world and lived experience
- ✓ **The ability to follow multi-step information**, vital for grasping, for example, scientific processes, historical narratives and mathematical reasoning

"Spoken language comprehension is a major predictor of reading comprehension" (Hogan et al, 2014). Lack of effort, motivation or specific reading difficulties may not be the issue – students may be struggling with oral language instead.

Spoken language shapes written content

Did you know that writing is one of the most linguistically demanding tasks students face? When we write, we internalise talk and then convey our message in written form. The processes are those involved in talking:

- Holding an idea in mind
- ↓
- Organising it into a logical structure
- ↓
- Selecting the appropriate vocabulary
- ↓
- Using grammar accurately
- ↓
- Adapting their tone and style for the intended audience

References

Snowling, M. J., Nash, H. M., Hulme, C., Hayiou-Thomas, M. E., & Gooch, D. C. (2019). *Developmental Outcomes for Children at High Risk of Dyslexia and Children With Developmental Language Disorder*. *Child Development*, 90(5), September/October 2019, Pages e548–e56

Hogan, T. P., Adlof, S. M., & Alonzo, C. N. (2014). On the importance of listening comprehension. *International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 16(3), 199–207. <https://tinyurl.com/4by24pm6>

What clues in written work could indicate underlying weak language skills? Writing can be brief, disorganised or lack clarity. Pupils may understand content well but be unable to express it in a way that reflects their knowledge.

Communication difficulties

As a pupil gets older, they become more aware of themselves and their position in the world. They may think - *Am I as smart as the others? What do my classmates think of me?* And alongside this, they may become more aware of how they talk to others. Pupils may avoid answering questions in lessons and taking part in class discussions because they worry about slipping up in front of their peers. Unfortunately, this also means that they won't have as much talking practice, and over time a vicious cycle can start, exacerbating literacy needs.

Discussion also supports metacognition – the ability to articulate one's thinking, justify decisions and reflect on learning processes. These are vital skills for secondary success and particularly essential for KS4 exams, where pupils are expected to describe, explain and evaluate with precision.

The role of each subject teacher

It's a common misconception that language development is specific to English lessons or SEND. However, every subject relies on its own form of academic talk.

- **Science** requires pupils to describe processes and use technical vocabulary accurately.
- **Geography** includes language skills, such as comparison, explanation and analysis.
- **History** involves constructing arguments, evaluating evidence and using specialist language.
- **Maths** needs precise use of language to follow reasoning and understand problem-solving steps.

Embedding language and communication opportunities in everyday classroom practice benefits all pupils and supports literacy outcomes in every subject.

Ways to strengthen language for literacy:

Creating a language-rich environment where pupils hear, practise and internalise the linguistic structures means success in reading and writing.

5

LANGUAGE STRATEGIES

- 1 **Explicit vocabulary teaching** – pre-teach key terms, use visuals, explore word relationships and encourage pupils to use new vocabulary in speaking and writing.
- 2 **Structured talk opportunities** – such as think-pair-share, sentence starters and debate frameworks, can help pupils rehearse ideas orally before writing.
- 3 **Model critical language** – verbalise your thinking and structure explanations carefully.
- 4 **Break down complex language** – paraphrase exam questions, unpack long sentences and talk through how to approach challenging texts.
- 5 **Consistent language routines** – allow adults to use the same, agreed ways of questioning, summarising and checking understanding to help students internalise prompts, useful for speaking and written work.

Language and communication – should this be a whole school priority?

Simply put, yes! Language and communication development should never be considered an optional add-on.

Language and communication are vital components of literacy itself. Investing time and energy in these foundations create opportunities for learning across every subject and every stage of secondary education.





Unlocking the hidden barriers to literacy in secondary school

It's easy to assume that by the time students reach secondary school, their language skills are fully developed. This is not the case. Between the ages of 11 and 14, students continue to refine higher-level language skills, use language in increasingly sophisticated ways and expand their knowledge of complex, subject-specific vocabulary.

Some of your students will be struggling with these skills, but may still fall under the radar. Often spoken language difficulties can go unnoticed, only to show up in other ways.

Take Lucy, who had been quietly struggling with literacy despite consistent effort in class. Teachers noticed that she often seemed to understand less than her peers, but her difficulties didn't fit neatly into any one category. She could read individual words, yet longer passages left her confused. Her written work was brief, lacking detail and she frequently misunderstood task instructions. Until this point, no one had recognised that the root of these challenges was actually an underlying language difficulty.

When the school introduced **Secondary Language Link**, Lucy was screened alongside the rest of Year 7. The assessment revealed specific weaknesses in her vocabulary, processing spoken information and understanding complex sentences, all key foundations for literacy. For the first time, staff had clear evidence of what was holding her back.



Lucy took part in structured, targeted interventions designed to strengthen her spoken language. These sessions helped her build the vocabulary she needed, improve her ability to follow multi-step information and develop confidence with longer, more complex sentence structures. Over the term, teachers began to see real changes: she contributed more in class, understood texts with greater accuracy and her writing became more detailed.

By identifying Lucy's hidden language needs and providing timely support, **Secondary Language Link** unlocked the literacy progress she had been capable of all along.

See how Secondary Language link can unlock literacy skills by taking a FREE TRIAL



One TA to another



FACT OR FICTION?

Helping students navigate fakenews

By **Claire Chambers**, The Link magazine editor

Every day our students scroll through social media feeds, watch videos, read headlines and chat with friends – exposing them to a mix of facts, opinions and misinformation. Some posts might be harmless, like false celebrity gossip, while others could encourage risky or harmful behaviour.

As a TA we are often in a unique position to pick up on some of the inaccuracies in their information and help them spot what's real, and importantly, what's not.

Understanding misinformation and fake news

This can be difficult, especially for our learners with SLCN, as tricky language and complex ideas can be challenging. Those with DLD, learning difficulties, or social communication challenges may struggle with the higher-order thinking needed to spot misinformation.

If we are working in small groups or 1-1 with SLCN learners, we are ideally placed to support their development of the foundational comprehension skills needed to be able to evaluate information and form sound judgements.

Here are some ideas to consider when discussing whether news is real or not:

- ✓ **Ask the right questions**
Who made this? Why share it? Does it have proof? If it sounds too good (or too bad) to be true, pause and think.
- ✓ **Check the source**
Reliable information comes from trusted outlets, not random posts or viral memes.

- ✓ **Encourage fact-checking**
Introduce your students to reliable fact-checking tools.*
- ✓ **Watch out for images and videos**
Pictures and clips can be edited or taken out of context. Try a reverse image search to check where they really came from.
- ✓ **Discuss algorithms and echo chambers**
Social media platforms are not neutral. Algorithms personalise content based on what users already like or engage with, which can trap them in 'echo chambers'.
- ✓ **Get a second opinion**
Ask a teacher, parent or friend you trust. Another perspective can reveal what's real.

Conclusion

These days, students are constantly surrounded by information online, so being able to spot misinformation and fake news is vital skill. By focusing on critical thinking and open discussions, your students will be better equipped to make sense of the digital world and make smarter choices online.

FACT A 2022 report from media watchdog Ofcom found that only 11% of 12 to 17 year olds could reliably recognise the signs that indicated a post was genuine.**

* FACT CHECKING TOOLS

Snopes www.snopes.com/fact-check

BBC Verify www.bbc.co.uk/news/bbcverify

Full Fact www.fullfact.org

** <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/media-use-and-attitudes/attitudes-to-news/one-in-three-internet-users-fail-to-question-misinformation>

Read The Impact of 'Fake News' on children with SLCN on our blog



What does 'universal support' really mean for SLCN at secondary?



By **Alison Fowle**, specialist speech and language therapist at Speech & Language Link

If you work in schools, you'll likely be familiar with the model of universal, targeted and specialist support used by many NHS services and speech and language therapy providers. The exact offer varies, but the overarching structure is consistent:

UNIVERSAL support focuses on what's available across the setting and is accessed by ALL students. This relates to everyday practices, routines and communication-friendly approaches used across the whole school. This includes the way teachers explain concepts, scaffold talk, use visuals, set up discussions and build an inclusive communication culture in every subject. When these approaches are shared and consistent, students are better able to understand content, participate in lessons and articulate their learning.

TARGETED support is accessed by a smaller number of identified students, who need more than the universal level alone. It is usually time-limited support to help that student during a particular transition or to learn a new skill. It

might be working with students in a group, or introducing a personalised resource that's used within the classroom.

SPECIALIST support builds on the resources and strategies that have been put in place at a universal and targeted level and is accessed by identified students who require tailored recommendations and personalised goals, with guidance from services such as speech and language therapy or educational psychology.

There is often a good understanding of what targeted and specialist provision looks like in practice, perhaps because provision is visible and timetabled. Universal provision can feel less clear, but the power of universal provision should not be underestimated. It forms the

foundation from which any additional support is built and ultimately makes those higher levels of intervention more effective.

Universal support matters in secondary

High quality teacher-student interactions are one of the strongest predictors of progress in both academic and language skills. They also support social understanding, self-regulation, engagement and readiness for future learning. Crucially, these interactions act as a social leveller: when classroom communication

is strong, students from a wide range of backgrounds make significant gains.

Universal strategies build a communication-supportive environment, which allows young people to gain independence in their classroom and school setting. This helps students to “learn how to learn”. Universal support reduces barriers before they affect GCSE or A-level outcomes. It’s the most cost and time-effective way to make the biggest difference.

Here are 5 ways in which you can strengthen the universal provision in your school.

1 Invest in whole-school training

Effective universal provision depends on everyone recognising the importance of language and communication. When all staff (subject teachers, TAs, pastoral teams, lunchtime supervisors, cover supervisors and leaders) share a consistent approach, students experience clarity and predictability across the school day.

2 Audit what you already do

Auditing your school’s communication environment can highlight strengths, gaps and opportunities to develop staff expertise. It also helps leaders direct training and resources where they are most needed while identifying colleagues who can support others.

3 Use classroom interventions that benefit all learners

Universal interventions enrich whole class teaching rather than removing students from lessons. Reflect on your current use of visuals, sentence scaffolds, modelled vocabulary or structured discussion prompts, and how these could be strengthened.

Secondary Language Link subscribers will find a bank of resources in the ‘Classroom Resources’ tab.

4 Keep approaches consistent across subjects

A Year 9 pupil may have six different teachers in one day. Consistency matters.

Shared strategies, such as pre-teaching vocabulary, modelling sentence structures, using clear visuals and supporting turn-taking reduce cognitive load and help students apply skills across subjects.

5 Champion and share good practice

Secondary teachers rarely observe one another, so great communication practice can go unnoticed. Positive peer feedback helps ideas spread and builds staff confidence.

Simple comments such as:

“The scaffold you used helped everyone take part,”
or *“I hadn’t seen that visual used that way—could I try it too?”*

can make a significant difference.

Speech & Language Link

Find out more about Speech & Language Link here:



So, in summary ...

- ✓ Universal support is essential. It underpins all other levels of provision and helps students meet the increasing language demands of secondary learning.
- ✓ Consistency matters. Shared strategies across subjects reduce barriers and build independence.
- ✓ Positive feedback builds momentum. Celebrating good practice strengthens confidence and spreads expertise throughout the school.
- ✓ Change starts with a conversation. Have a chat with a colleague about your thoughts on the universal provision in the school to get the ball rolling.



THE LINK LIVE

Speech & Language Day

LinkLive



BACK
FOR 2026

EVENT DETAILS

Date: Thursday 30th April 2026

Location: Online

Cost: Free for The Link Community members

Join us for The Link Live 2026

– a day that will transform your SLCN support!

Speech & Language Link are thrilled to invite you to The Link Live 2026. Our flagship, annual event is designed for SENCOs, teachers and support staff who are passionate about making a real difference for students with speech, language, and communication needs (SLCN).

Get ready for a day that's inspiring, practical, and packed with expertise!

What's in store?

A high energy programme featuring 7 specialist speakers, each bringing their own expert insights, real world experience and powerful strategies you can take straight back into your setting.

Expect fresh thinking, practical tools and inspiring ideas to boost your support for pupils with SLCN.

How much does it cost?

Great news, it's completely FREE for members of The Link Community (TLC)!

If you're part of TLC, your ticket is waiting for you.

Can't make the whole day? No problem!

We've got you covered. All sessions will be released in the months following the event, exclusively for TLC members. Dip in whenever it suits you!

What do I need to do now?

To register for your free ticket, simply scan the QR code and log in to your account to access your free ticket.

Any questions?

Get in touch with Nancy and Claire at: linklive@speechlink.co.uk

GRAB YOUR
FREE
TICKETS HERE!



Meet our speakers



ABIGAIL HAWKINS

SEN consultant, author and advocate.
Founder of SENSible SENCO.

Presenting:
What we see isn't always what it seems



KATE FREEMAN

Consultant – speech and language in education

Presenting:
Oracy and the curriculum



ALI NEAL

Consultant occupational therapist

Presenting:
Regulation through the senses for children with SLCN using The BREAD Approach



ALISON FOWLE & JULIET LEONARD

Specialist speech and language therapists at Speech & Language Link

Presenting:
Little Link and school readiness



SHELBI ANNISON

Shelbi is an adult with dyslexia and developmental language disorder (DLD) and a published author

Presenting:
You can't see DLD



LOUISE EMERSON

Specialist speech and language therapist at Speech & Language Link

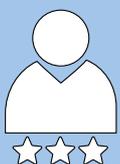
Presenting:
Neuro-affirming considerations



ANN MARIE CHRISTIAN

International safeguarding consultant and trainer

Presenting:
Safeguarding challenges for children with SLCN



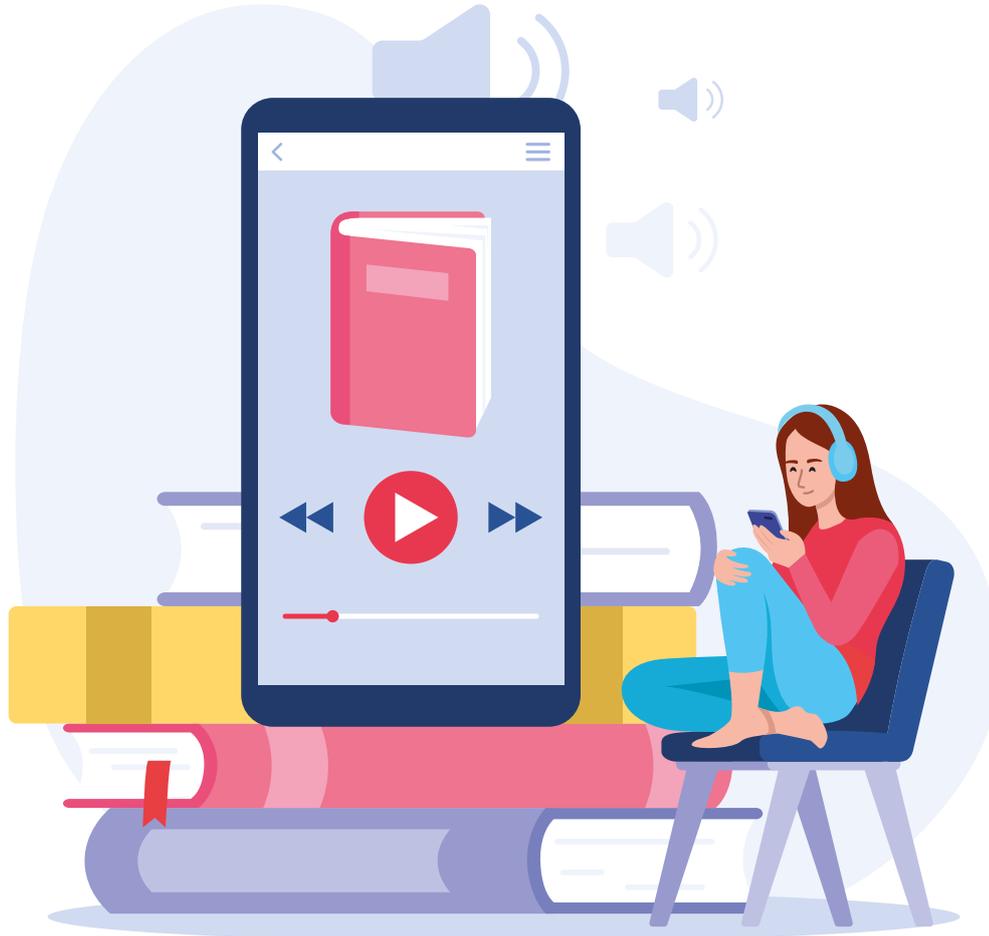
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ACCESSIBLE READING:

a multi-modal approach — reading, listening, watching.



By **Emma Steel**, head of Every Cherry

Recent GOV.UK 2025 data confirms that children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) face significant reading gaps, with 40% (or 59% in some breakdowns) not meeting expected standards by the end of primary school. (<https://tinyurl.com/yc77nyxa>)

As a teacher of English in secondary SEN schools, I found this figure particularly alarming. We are all aware that reading provides the foundations to many elements in life. From reading books to day-to-day functioning, such as reading a shopping list or social media posts, reading

provides **connection, joy** through escaping into narratives, and the ability to **navigate** through an ever-growing digital world.

However, reading can be a big struggle for many people. This may be due to cognitive disability, dyslexia, specific neurodivergence, processing challenges, etc. But none of these provide enough cause to give up!

Instead, breaking down barriers to reading is key. Identifying these barriers and catching readers in 'reading safety nets', providing a wholesome, and achievable approach to reading is vital.

With seventeen years SEN teaching experience, I realised that reading isn't 'one size fits all'. Instead, it's about recalibrating reading and opening the door to reading in ways that best suits readers.

Looking back historically, we see civilisations' reading patterns changing. From Stone Age drawings on cave walls and Egyptian hieroglyphs, to medieval stained-glass windows, these methods created a way to communicate, record information and ultimately teach others, stemming from images or drawings. And we still use this form of reading today - looking around any public space, you will see social signs in the form of images, such as 'Fire Exit' or 'No Smoking' signs.

It is interesting to note the Oxford Learner's Dictionary definition of reading is: "To look at and understand the meaning of written, or printed, words or symbols".

So perhaps, to raise the levels of reading and learning attainment, we need to re-address **how** we best break down barriers to reading.

Our work at Every Cherry Publishing has strived to find the answer. From working with young people, developing case studies, engaging parent groups, delivering research and many more avenues, Every Cherry has sought to break down as many challenges to reading as possible.

A 'Total Communication' reading approach is needed. Rather than focusing solely on the process of reading, a multi-modal approach can benefit many readers. This form of reading can provide 'safety nets'. When the process of reading becomes too much and loses its aspect of pleasure, instead of giving up and putting the book down, there are other avenues to explore. But how?

Many **Every Cherry partner schools** have begun a multi-modal approach to reading in classrooms. Firstly, using differentiated texts in printed form. The same book in two different formats was used: in **Easier** and **Symbolised** formats. The **Easier** range uses dyslexia-friendly font, larger text, simple sentences and illustrations on every page. The **Symbolised** editions include the same features as their **Easier** counterpart but also include symbols (visual clues) above key words. This makes reading more accessible for those who use symbols as a

primary form of communication, as well as for people reading at a lower reading age.

The schools found the key to the success of these texts was the fact that the pages matched in content and format but differed in reading level and reading technique. This meant that students could access the same text but in an inclusive way, not having to resort to 'breakout groups' because of low reading levels.

"Rather than focusing solely on the process of reading, a multi-modal approach can benefit many readers."

If some pupils began to find reading challenging over time, they could access free audiobooks via a QR code, offering an alternative way to stay engaged with the text through listening. However, if maintaining focus while listening proved difficult, the symbolised versions also included signed, animated videos of the text, offering an additional 'safety net' to support continued engagement.

This holistic approach to reading became a huge asset to many school English curricula. This wasn't just about reading words. It was about comprehension, context and the emotional resonance of story through a multi-modal approach to reading.

The best part was this approach to reading came in the form of the classics. From *Oliver Twist* to *Frankenstein* to *King Lear*, reading, listening and watching was available in the form of books that are recommended in the KS3 and KS4 curricula.

Although reading will always be a challenge for many, perhaps the use of a 'Total Reading Experience' through supported reading, listening and watching, really could be the key that unlocks reading for many young people.

Accessible reading, in the end, is not about simplifying texts. It's about designing them with everyone in mind from the start. It's about removing barriers and making sure that every individual can connect with a story.



Every Cherry is an award-winning imprint of Sweet Cherry Publishing, bringing high quality reading material to people with a range of learning disabilities and difficulties.

Find out more at: www.everycherry.com



welcome to **The Link**



Be a voice for speech, language and communication and you'll receive a 'limited edition travel mug with tasty treats' for the ultimate pick-me-up!

Got a great story to share? We'd love to hear it!

Tell us how Secondary Language Link has made a difference in your school, whether through a testimonial or a case study, and we'll brighten your morning break with a travel mug and tasty treats to keep you going.



Limited edition travel mug – made for teachers on the go!



Dates for your diary

We're kicking off 2026 with a burst of energy and a calendar full of fantastic events!

If you're attending any of them, be sure to come and say hello as we'd love to meet you. And if travelling isn't an option, you can still join the fun at **The Link Live Speech & Language Day**.



13-14TH MARCH
Tes SEND Show North, Emirates,
Old Trafford Cricket Ground, Manchester

19TH MARCH
Nursery World Exchange, Cambridge

30TH APRIL
The Link Live Speech & Language Day

15TH MAY
Nursery World's Big Day Out, Business
Design Centre, London
Speech & Language Link is **The Gold
Sponsor** – come and find us on stand E10



Our Facebook Group
Speech and Language
support for schools



Join the conversation with **over 4,000** members and receive weekly videos and posts from our speech and language team, take part in fun, short polls and surveys and share good practice.



Community news

INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

Download our International Schools Brochure

Did you know that Secondary Language Link provides support in overseas schools as well as the UK? It has been designed to tackle the complex communication needs of students aged 11-14 years and can be used with children with English as an additional language (EAL) to establish their functional levels of understanding in English.



The Speech & Language Link Parent Portal - speech and language support for parents, carers and families.

Secondary Language Link provides lots of resources for schools to share with families, but for those who are not yet subscribers, our Parent Portal is a free award-winning site created by our speech and language therapists to provide clear SLCN information and practical resources.

Support includes:

- ✓ Advice
- ✓ Stage-appropriate activities
- ✓ Videos
- ✓ Podcasts and downloadable activities

Schools can include the Speech & Language Link Parent Portal as part of their support offering, by linking to it from their website and customising its heading with their school name.



Add this to your website today



Strengthening language and unlocking literacy with Secondary Language Link

Secondary Language Link helps schools uncover the language barriers that can quietly undermine literacy.

By identifying needs and strengthening spoken language – including vocabulary, information processing, complex sentences and grammar – progress in reading and writing naturally follows.

How does it help?

- ✔ Identifies underlying verbal language needs that also impact literacy
- ✔ Provides language and communication interventions for KS3 pupils
- ✔ Boosts spoken language as the foundation for oracy, reading and writing
- ✔ Tracks progress clearly to evidence language improvement
- ✔ Aligns seamlessly with whole-school literacy and SEND priorities

When we strengthen language, we UNLOCK literacy!

Open the door to your students' potential by finding out more about **Secondary Language Link** today.

