

WHAT WE SEE IS NOT ALWAYS WHAT IT SEEMS

Spotting and supporting hidden speech, language and communication needs

Practical strategies for Teachers, TAs and SENCOs to spot the signs early, act quickly and adjust support

WHAT MIGHT BE GOING UNHEARD?



WHY THIS MATTERS IN EVERY CLASSROOM

- Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) impact learning behaviour and wellbeing in ways that aren't always obvious. Many children with these needs "fly under the radar" because their difficulties aren't immediately apparent.
- When we misinterpret these needs, we miss crucial opportunities to provide additional support. Every staff member in a school has the potential to notice subtle signs and take action.



COMMON MISINTERPRETATIONS OF SLCN

| | |
|--|--|
| 1 | 2 |
| WE THINK: "THEY'RE NOT LISTENING" | WE THINK: "THEY'RE LAZY" |
| When actually: "They didn't process the information" | When actually: "They didn't understand the task" |
| 3 | 4 |
| WE THINK: "THEY'RE SHY" | WE THINK: "THEY'RE BEING DIFFICULT" |
| When actually: "They can't find the words" | When actually: "They're facing an invisible barrier" |

We often label the behaviour we see rather than identifying the underlying communication difficulties.

BEHAVIOURS TEACHERS/TAS MIGHT SEE



- **Seeking clarification**
 - Repeatedly asking, "What do I do?" even after instructions have been given
- **Relying on others**
 - Guessing or copying from peers rather than processing information independently
- **Delayed starting**
 - Struggling to begin work without additional prompts or demonstrations
- **Communication patterns**
 - Talking off-topic, giving vague answers, or using deflection behaviours like "clowning around"

CLASSROOM RED FLAGS FOR SENCO



- **Performance gap**
 - Noticeable discrepancy between verbal contributions and written work quality
- **Inconsistent progress**
 - Slow or variable progress despite clear effort or engagement
- **Vocabulary limitations**
 - Overuse of non-specific words like "thing", "that", "stuff" in speech
- **Participation avoidance**
 - Reluctance to read aloud or participate in class discussions

PRIMARY TO SECONDARY: WHERE NEEDS GET MISSED


- Primary school strategies often don't transfer or get lost in the transition
- Secondary education brings significantly higher vocabulary demands across multiple subjects
- Students have less scaffolding from familiar adults who know their needs
- Many students actively mask their needs to fit in with peers in a new environment

PRACTICAL TRANSITION SAFEGUARDS

- 1 **Before transition**
 SENCO-to-SENCO handover meetings focusing specifically on communication needs
 Creation of written strategies that are subject-specific and practical
- 2 **During transition**
 Implement "quick wins": subject-specific vocabulary lists, visual timetables
 Establish buddy systems with peers who can model good communication
- 3 **After transition**
 First term observation period for all new students to identify emerging needs
 Regular check-ins with students and subject teachers to assess strategy effectiveness

EAL OR SLCN... OR BOTH?

- **Distinguishing between needs**
 - Look for "red flags" that go beyond typical second language acquisition patterns
 - Check if difficulties are consistent in both English and home language
 - Focus on comprehension rather than pronunciation or accent
- **Collaborative approach**
 - Establish regular connection channels between EAL specialists and SENCOs to share observations and strategies



SIGNS THAT WARRANT FURTHER INVESTIGATION

| | |
|--|---|
| Sequential processing Persistent difficulty following multi-step instructions, even when peers can manage them | Narrative skills Trouble sequencing ideas or retelling events in logical order |
| Vocabulary range Limited vocabulary for age-related expectations, particularly with abstract concepts | Figurative understanding Misinterpreting non-literal language, idioms, jokes or taking things too literally |

These signs are particularly significant when they persist despite quality-first teaching and standard interventions.

CLASSROOM STRATEGIES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

- **Instruction delivery**
 - Give instructions one step at a time rather than in a sequence
 - Check understanding discreetly without putting pupils on the spot
- **Multi-modal support**
 - Use visuals, gestures and concrete examples to reinforce verbal information
 - Provide written instructions alongside verbal ones
- **Language scaffolding**
 - Repeat and rephrase key points using consistent language
 - Pre-teach tricky vocabulary before introducing new concepts



TA'S ROLE IN SPOTTING AND SUPPORTING SLCN

- **Observe process, not just outcome**
 - Notice *how* instructions are followed, not just whether the task is completed
- **Communication bridge**
 - Feed back patterns and observations to teachers and SENCOs systematically
- **Language modelling**
 - Use clear, concise language with pupils and avoid over-complicated explanations
- **Balanced support**
 - Provide prompts and cues without speaking for the pupil or creating dependency

TEACHER'S ROLE IN ADAPTING PRACTICE

Plan for language load

Consider the vocabulary and linguistic demands of each lesson during planning



Multi-modal instruction

Deliver information through spoken, written and visual channels simultaneously

Universal checking

Create "no hands up" methods to check understanding that involves all pupils

Cognitive load management

Break complex tasks into small, manageable steps with clear success criteria

SENCO'S ROLE IN DRIVING CHANGE

Awareness Building

Develop staff training to recognise subtle SLCN signs across different age groups and contexts

Strategy coordination

Ensure consistent approaches are used across different subjects and classrooms

Impact monitoring

Track the effectiveness of classroom adaptations through regular observations and data collection

Professional liaison

Work with Speech and Language Therapists where needed, and maintain teaching perspective

AVOIDING THE "BEHAVIOUR-FIRST" TRAP

Integrated observation

Keep behaviour logs alongside academic observations to identify potential patterns

Question assumptions

Ask: "Could this behaviour be a result of processing or comprehension difficulties?"

Context matters

Look for patterns across different contexts, subjects, and times of day

Ongoing assessment

Avoid making one-off judgements; build a comprehensive picture over time

EMBEDDING A 'LANGUAGE-AWARE' CULTURE

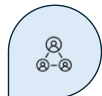
Whole-school CPD

Regular training on recognising SLCN signs and implementing effective strategies



Resource bank

Shared collection of visual, vocabulary lists and communication supports



Pupil self-advocacy

Students taught to recognise and express their own communication needs



Staff collaboration

Culture where staff routinely share observations about communication patterns



A language-aware school benefits *all* pupils, not just those with identified SLCN.

CASE SNAPSHOTS

The "daydreamer"

James was constantly in trouble for "not paying attention" and "daydreaming". After structured observation, it became clear he was actually missing verbal instructions due to auditory processing difficulties.

Intervention: Written instructions and visual cues alongside verbal directions dramatically improved his engagement.

The "copycat"

Amina waited to see what others did before starting work and was labelled as lacking motivation. Assessment revealed a significant vocabulary gap that made instructions difficult to understand.

Intervention: Pre-teaching key vocabulary and using visual task boards helped her work independently.

The "behaviour problem"

Ryan had frequent behaviour escalations, particularly during English. Further investigation showed that he was misunderstanding figurative language and idioms, leading to confusion and frustration.

Intervention: Explicit teaching of non-literal language and clear signposting of metaphors reduced incidents significantly.

QUICK WINS TO TRY TOMORROW

- **Sequential instructions**
- Use "First... Then..." language structure for instructions to make sequence clear
- **Vocabulary front-loading**
- Pre-teach key words before introducing new concepts or starting lessons
- **Comprehension check**
- Verify instructions are understood *before* pupils begin independent work
- **Processing time**
- Allow thinking time before expecting an answer – count to (at least) 5 silently

FINAL REFLECTION PROMPT FOR STAFF

When you see a behaviour, ask yourself:
 "Could this be a language processing difficulty?"
 "What's the simplest way I can adapt right now?"

Keep curiosity alive - SLCN is not always obvious and may present differently in different contexts or with different tasks.

Small adaptations can make an enormous difference to a pupil's ability to access learning and experience success.

CLOSING MESSAGE

Listen beyond words

Remember that behaviour is a form of communication – what might pupils be trying to tell us through their actions?

Everyday opportunities

Teachers, TAs and SENCOs have the daily vantage point to spot subtle signs that others might miss.

Critical question

The most important question we can ask ourselves: *"What might be going unheard?"*
