

# The Link

SECONDARY



CARBON  
BALANCED  
PAPER

www.carbonbalancedpaper.com  
CBP035944

THE SPEECH & LANGUAGE MAGAZINE FOR SCHOOLS

ORACY  
SPECIAL

Safeguarding  
students with SLCN

ISSUE  
9  
2026

Brought to you by: Speech & Language Link - visit [speechandlanguage.link](https://speechandlanguage.link)



INCLUSION BASES IN  
SECONDARY



ORACY IN SECONDARY  
SCHOOLS



ORACY AND SLCN

Dear SENCo,

Welcome to this special edition, focussed on **oracy**.

Talk sits at the heart of learning. It shapes how young people think, reason, connect with others and make sense of the world around them. In this issue of **The Link Secondary**, we explore what high-quality talk really looks like in secondary classrooms and how we can ensure every student is supported to take part.

On page 4, specialist speech and language therapist, **Yin Collighan**, unpacks the building blocks of oracy and the essential speech and language foundations that underpin confident classroom talk. We take a lighter look at language on page 6

with our **One TA to Another** feature exploring slang and teen talk: how it evolves, how it becomes part of everyday language, and why trying to be "down with the students" doesn't always go to plan!

International safeguarding consultant and trainer, **Ann Marie Christian**, offers expert guidance on safeguarding, highlighting the particular challenges faced by young people with speech, language and communication difficulties. As she notes on page 12, *"If a child doesn't recognise harm, they are unlikely to tell someone about it"*.

On page 14, **Kate Freeman**, consultant speech and language therapist in education, examines inclusion bases through a speech, language and communication needs

(SLCN) lens. Specialist speech and language therapist, **Louise Emerson**, reflects on the barriers to talk and the adjustments that can make communication-rich classrooms accessible for all (page 16).

Whether you're developing a whole school approach to oracy or refining practice in your classrooms, this special edition is designed to support confident, inclusive communication to enable every young person to be able to find, and use, their voice.



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

# CONTENTS

3

## GLOSSARY – ORACY

By Sophie Mustoe-Playfair, specialist speech and language therapist at Speech & Language Link

4-5

## ORACY IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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

6

## ONE TA TO ANOTHER – WHEN SLANG ENTERS THE CLASSROOM

By Claire Chambers, The Link editor

7

## THE LINK LIVE 2026, A REVIEW



8-9

## ASK A THERAPIST – TOP ORACY ACTIVITIES FOR THE SECONDARY CLASSROOM

By Juliet Leonard, specialist speech and language therapist at Speech & Language Link


10

## INTRODUCING THE YOUTH JUSTICE SLCN TOOL

12-13

## SAFEGUARDING STUDENTS WITH SPEECH, LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION NEEDS (SLCN)

Based on a presentation by Ann Marie Christian, international safeguarding consultant and trainer

 *This article discusses safeguarding and consent, including sensitive topics. Some readers may find this content challenging. Please take care when reading and seek support if needed.*

14-15

## INCLUSION BASES IN SECONDARY: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR SLCN-FRIENDLY PRACTICE

By Kate Freeman, consultant — speech and language in education

16-17

## ORACY AND SLCN

By Louise Emerson, specialist speech and language therapist at Speech & Language Link

18-19

## THE LINK COMMUNITY NEWS



# engage collaborate AAC visual prompts discussion express

# glossary

## Oracy

### DIALOGIC TEACHING



By **Sophie Mustoe-Playfair**, highly specialist speech and language therapist and speech and language therapy manager at Speech & Language Link

## ORACY

**O**racy refers to the skills involved in speaking, listening and communicating effectively. It includes spoken language but also non verbal communication such as gesture, facial expression, body language, sign language and forms of alternative and augmentative communication (AAC). Just as literacy provides tools for reading and writing, and numeracy supports working with numbers, oracy equips pupils to successfully communicate and collaborate with others.

### Key strands of oracy

- Learning how to communicate: developing the skills needed for clear, confident communication
- Learning about communication: understanding how talking and listening works, including tone, purpose and audience
- Learning through communication: using discussion and dialogue as tools for learning across the curriculum

Oracy is not only a route to learning; it's a skill set in its own right. Embedding oracy across the curriculum means talk becomes a central part of every subject, not just English. Talk is treated as a purposeful activity rather than a warm up for written work.

### What oracy looks like in the classroom

Classrooms that prioritise oracy establish clear ground rules for listening, turn taking and respectful discussion. These shared expectations help pupils feel secure and ready to contribute.

Teachers use dialogic teaching: asking open questions, encouraging students to explore ideas aloud and prompting them to build on or challenge each other's thinking. Group talk becomes a structured exchange where students explain, justify and connect ideas.

It is useful to distinguish between:

- Talk for learning: exploratory, informal and often unfinished as pupils work out their thinking
- Talk for performance: more polished and structured, used for presentations or formal explanations

Students benefit from knowing which mode they are working in, and classroom staff should adjust their support and feedback to suit the goal of the task.

### Supporting students with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN)

Many strategies that support pupils with SLCN benefit all learners. Helpful approaches include:

- Allowing extra processing time before expecting a response. Evidence suggests that 12 seconds provides an effective balance between processing time and engagement
- Making ground rules explicit and predictable so that students feel secure and prepared
- Clarifying vocabulary and simplifying complex sentences without diluting the content keeps discussions accessible and inclusive
- Teaching students how to ask for clarification. This builds confidence, reduces anxiety and helps them stay engaged in the conversation
- Providing structure through roles, sentence stems or visual prompts offers a framework that supports successful participation

When we create classrooms where every student has the tools to express themselves, we open the door to greater insights and a richer learning experience for all. Oracy is a foundation for learning, confidence and connection, helping every student express themselves, engage meaningfully with others, and to learn more deeply.



# ORACY IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS



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

**T**he term oracy, first introduced by Wilkinson (1965), refers to the ability to use spoken language effectively. In secondary classrooms, this might involve, for example, explaining ideas clearly, responding to different viewpoints, presenting information to a group or contributing thoughtfully to discussion.

These skills are needed across the school day. A student might be explaining their reasoning in maths, analysing a text in English, discussing a historical argument or presenting findings from a science investigation. These moments of talk allow students to clarify their thinking, test ideas and learn from others.

The Oracy Education Commission's report *We Need to Talk* (2024) \* highlights the importance of oracy and, encouragingly, the recent White Paper *Every Child Achieving and Thriving* (2026) \*\* sets plans to publish an oracy, reading and writing framework to help secondary school teachers to embed these skills across the curriculum. This increased focus on oracy reflects the growing recognition that spoken language is central to learning. Research supports this assertion: approaches prioritising spoken language can positively impact attainment, particularly in reading (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021). Spoken language also helps build vocabulary and comprehension, supporting students when they encounter increasingly complex concepts and information as they move through secondary education.

Communication skills also support students' confidence and relationships. Being able to explain ideas clearly, ask questions and respond respectfully to others' perspectives helps young people participate more fully in learning.

And, of course, communication skills matter beyond school. Employers consistently rank communication as one of the most important employability skills (NACE, 2016). Developing strong spoken language therefore supports both academic success and preparation for further education, training and employment.

## The Oracy Skills Framework

Voice 21 and University of Cambridge developed **The Oracy Skills Framework** to describe the range of skills they propose are involved in effective communication. This framework identifies four interconnected areas:

**Physical skills** relate to how communication is delivered. This includes speaking clearly, adjusting volume appropriately and varying tone to convey meaning. Body language and facial expressions can also influence how a message is received.

**Linguistic skills** focus on the language students use. This includes vocabulary, sentence structure and choosing language that suits the audience and context. In secondary school, this often involves developing subject-specific vocabulary and using more complex language to explain ideas.

“For oracy to be successful, the foundations of communication need to be secure.”



**Cognitive skills** involve organising and developing ideas. Students need to select relevant information, explain their reasoning and respond to the contributions of others during discussions.

**Social and emotional skills** shape how students interact with others when communicating. These include listening carefully, taking turns in discussion, responding thoughtfully and developing the confidence to share ideas in front of others.

The framework emphasises that oracy relies on a wide range of underlying abilities.

### What underpins oracy?

**Speech, language and communication skills that contribute to oracy include:**

- ✓ Understanding complex spoken information
- ✓ Using a broad and precise vocabulary
- ✓ Constructing clear and grammatically accurate sentences
- ✓ Processing spoken instructions and explanations
- ✓ Organising ideas when explaining or presenting information

Skills such as these underpin effective classroom talk and without them, students may struggle to express their thinking clearly or keep up with discussion. A student may understand a topic but struggle to explain their reasoning aloud.

Another may find it difficult to follow extended verbal explanations or contribute to group discussion. Some pupils may remain quiet during collaborative activities because verbally organising their thoughts feels overwhelming.

This knowledge is particularly pertinent when we consider how many young people continue to experience speech, language and communication needs in secondary school. Some pupils arrive with previously identified needs, while others may only begin to struggle once the language demands of the curriculum increase. In fact, for many pupils, the language demands of secondary school can bring previously hidden difficulties into focus.

### Secure foundations

For oracy to be successful, the foundations of communication need to be secure. A strong vocabulary, good language comprehension and the ability to organise ideas verbally, all play a crucial role in helping students participate in learning.

When these skills are supported alongside opportunities for discussion, debate and presentation, more students are able to contribute with confidence. In turn, this allows them to engage more fully in lessons, deepen their understanding of subjects and develop the communication skills they will rely on throughout education and into their future.

Take a trial



# When SLANG

## enters the classroom

By Claire Chambers, The Link editor

"Miss, that presentation was... elite," a Year 9 student announced while packing up.

I paused and eyed him with a modicum of suspicion. Was I being complimented? I nodded anyway and made a mental note to Google it later.

If you work in a secondary school, you'll know the pace of linguistic change is relentless. Words appear overnight, spread like wildfire and then vanish before you've even worked out whether they're acceptable in a sentence.

Some phrases such as "**peng**", "**bare**" and "**sick**" have (thankfully) faded away, while others linger long enough to make you question your own vocabulary. Apparently, "**mid**", "**NPC**" and "**main character energy**" are now part of everyday student language – sob!

While it may feel confusing (and occasionally irritating), slang is actually doing something quite impressive. It's a sign of creative, flexible language use.

### So how does slang become a 'real' word?

Plenty of perfectly respectable English words started life as slang. The difference? Staying power.

#### If a word:

- Catches on widely
  - Fills a gap in meaning
  - Escapes the playground and enters wider use
- ...it has a good chance of sticking around.

Teenagers, in particular, are brilliant at this. They test, tweak and reinvent language at speed. If we listen carefully (rather than immediately correcting), we get a front-row seat to how language is being reshaped in real time.

### Slang that made it

Here are a few words that were once dismissed as "not proper English" and are now completely unremarkable:

- **Cool** – once rebellious, now universally acceptable



One TA  
to another

- **Hang out** – informal, now everyday
- **Kid** – originally considered rude
- **Geek** – from insult to identity badge
- **OK** – arguably the most successful slang word ever

### Should we correct slang use?

Short answer: not constantly.

Frequent correction can shut down talk – especially for students who are already less confident, including those with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).

If students feel judged for how they speak, they may opt for the safest strategy of all: saying nothing. Instead, we can:

#### Model alternatives

Student: "That was **elite**."

You: "Yes, that was a really **persuasive** argument."

#### Talk about context

"That works in **conversation**, what might you use in an **essay** or **presentation**?"

This helps students develop the important skill of switching between informal and formal language – without making them feel like they've said something wrong.

### Final thought

While it might be tempting to join in...

Don't.

Just... don't.

For example: "If this article isn't **top tier**, that's on me trying too hard and coming across completely **mid**. Absolute **main character fail energy**."

I regret everything about that sentence.

Let the students have their language. It suits them much better.

# THE LINK LIVE 2026:

## bringing The Link Community together for speech and language

### Speakers



#### Ali Neal

Consultant occupational therapist

*Regulation through the senses for children with SLCN using 'The BREAD Approach'*



#### Kate Freeman

Consultant – speech and language in education

*Speech, language and communication: the building blocks for oracy*



#### Abigail Hawkins

SEN consultant

*What we see isn't always what it seems*



#### Alison Fowle & Juliet Leonard

Specialist speech and language therapists at Speech & Language Link

*Supporting language for school readiness*



#### Ann Marie Christian

International safeguarding consultant and trainer

*Safeguarding challenges for children with SLCN*



#### Louise Emerson

Specialist speech and language therapist at Speech & Language Link

*Neuro-affirming considerations*



#### Shelbi Annison

Ambassador for RADLD and AFASIC

*You can't see DLD (Developmental language disorder)*

At Speech & Language Link, we were delighted to welcome educators and professionals to *The Link Live Speech & Language Day 2026* – our annual event focused on improving outcomes for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).

With 898 places allocated, members of The Link Community joined us from across the UK and around the world; including South Africa, Australia, Asia and Europe. It was inspiring to see such a wide range of schools and settings come together, united by a shared commitment to putting speech, language and communication at the heart of learning.

Held on 30th April, this member-exclusive event featured seven high-impact sessions, each designed to connect research, policy and real classroom practice. Throughout the day, we explored key developments including the SEND White Paper and the current curriculum and assessment review, always keeping a clear focus on what this means for children in everyday classroom life.

We wanted the day to feel both practical and inspiring – and from the outset, that's exactly what it delivered. An opening session on emotional regulation offered strategies that could be used straight away, before we moved into a strong focus on oracy and the vital role speech, language and communication play in learning. A key theme was the importance of helping practitioners to spot the often-hidden needs that can so easily be missed.

The sense of community really stood out. Our live chat was buzzing throughout the day, with delegates sharing reflections, asking questions and learning from each other in real time. It was a great reminder that,

wherever we are in the world, we're all working towards the same goal.

In the afternoon, delegates could choose from a range of sessions, including *Supporting language for school readiness* and *Safeguarding children with SLCN* – both of which sparked thoughtful discussion. We also explored neuro-affirming language, sharing a powerful, child-

centred message about how the words we use can shape confidence, identity and impact long-term outcomes.

The day closed with a moving and reflective session on living with developmental language disorder (DLD), bringing lived

experience to the forefront and reinforcing just how important early identification and support can be.

A huge thank you goes to our fantastic speakers, who brought such depth, insight and energy to the day. We're also incredibly grateful to all our delegates, who took time out of very busy schedules to be part of the event. Your enthusiasm, engagement and willingness to share ideas made the day feel truly collaborative.

And the learning doesn't stop there. Over the coming months, members will be able to access all sessions on demand – making it easy to revisit key ideas, catch up on anything missed and share learning with colleagues.

Scan the QR code to find out how to access The Link Live recordings on-demand.



Supporting sponsors:



Best Practice Network





# ASK A Therapist



By **Juliet Leonard**, specialist speech and language therapist at Speech & Language Link

**Q:** What are the top oracy activities for the secondary classroom?

**A:**

Oracy is firmly back in focus, and rightly so. The ability to articulate ideas clearly, build understanding through discussion and engage critically with others is essential – not only for academic success, but for life beyond school.

### Getting the foundations right

Oracy begins with creating a respectful, purposeful environment where students feel confident to contribute. In secondary settings, this means establishing shared expectations for discussion: listening actively, responding thoughtfully and valuing different perspectives.

Clear structures are especially important. All students – and particularly those with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) – benefit from visual prompts, sentence starters and defined roles within discussions. Explicit turn-taking and expectations help ensure that every student has the opportunity to participate and be heard.

Oracy isn't just an outcome of learning – it's a key part of the learning process itself. Here are three practical activities to support effective talk in your classroom:

#### 1 Idea throwdown

An idea throwdown is a structured, reflective discussion where students explore ideas in depth. During an idea throwdown, students:

- ✓ Ask questions to clarify and challenge thinking
- ✓ Justify and explain their viewpoints
- ✓ Listen actively to others' contributions
- ✓ Build on ideas collaboratively, rather than competing to 'win'

Every student should have the opportunity to contribute. One student (or a pair) can take responsibility for capturing key points using bullet summaries, diagrams or visual notes.



### When might you use it?

- ✔ Analysing themes or character motivations in English texts
- ✔ Debating interpretations of historical events
- ✔ Exploring hypotheses in science investigations
- ✔ Discussing problem-solving approaches in maths

### 2 Verbal volleyball

Verbal volleyball encourages fast-paced, responsive talk. It works well in pairs or small groups and focuses on developing students' ability to think on their feet and build coherent responses.

- ✔ One student (or team) starts with an idea, statement or argument
- ✔ Another responds immediately with a connected point, question or extension
- ✔ The exchange continues, building a chain of linked responses

This activity develops fluency, listening skills and the ability to construct ideas in real time.

### When might you use it?

- ✔ Debating contrasting viewpoints in English or PSHE
- ✔ Exploring cause and consequence in history
- ✔ Practising subject-specific vocabulary (e.g., in science or geography)
- ✔ Preparing for spoken assessments or presentations

### 3 Insight exchange

The insight exchange structures more formal speaking and presentation opportunities. Students work collaboratively before sharing their thinking more publicly.

- ✔ Small groups discuss a question, issue or problem
- ✔ They develop a response, solution or viewpoint together
- ✔ Groups then present their ideas to the class

Presentations can include visual aids, key vocabulary or short role-plays to support understanding. Crucially, all group members should take part in presenting.

### When might you use it?

- ✔ Presenting a critical interpretation of a text
- ✔ Explaining the outcomes of an investigation
- ✔ Evaluating different viewpoints or arguments
- ✔ Proposing solutions to real-world or ethical issues
- ✔ Reflecting on project outcomes or group work

When talk is planned, supported and valued, students become more confident in expressing complex ideas. Structured oracy approaches help them develop the skills to articulate, justify and refine their thinking, while listening and responding to others.

Over time, this leads to deeper understanding, stronger engagement and more students feeling empowered to contribute – an essential foundation for success across the curriculum.

# Introducing the YOUTH JUSTICE SLCN TOOL



**T**oo many young people in the youth justice system are misunderstood – and the consequences can be serious. Speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) are a significant – and often hidden – part of that picture.

Over 60% of young people in the youth justice system have SLCN, yet only a small number have been identified before entering the system. In busy youth justice settings, these needs can go unnoticed – masked by young people, misunderstood by others and often mistaken for disengagement or poor behaviour.

Medway Council and the Speech & Language Link team came together to address this challenge. The result is the Youth Justice SLCN Tool, a therapist-designed digital resource that supports identification and provides meaningful, practical support.

The tool has four elements, each shaped for youth justice practice:

### 1. Training for staff

On-demand modules for those working directly with young people. They explain the importance of identifying and supporting SLCN and introduce practical strategies that can be used straight away.

### 2. The Skills Checker

An online screening tool, completed by the young person with adult support, exploring five areas: language structure, reasoning, self-help, memory, and attention/focus. Results are displayed visually. There is no pass or fail – the aim is to prompt discussion and build a shared understanding of strengths and needs.



### 3. My Action Plan (MAP)

The MAP enables young people to take an active role in their development by reflecting on:

- ✓ what they do well,
- ✓ what they want to improve,
- ✓ strategies to support communication,
- ✓ how others can help them achieve their goals.

### 4. The Support Bank

A set of short, 10-minute sessions for use with a youth justice worker. These help young people develop skills and reflect on their communication in a supportive, low-pressure way.

Since its launch in Medway in March, feedback has been extremely positive.

**Matt Charles, Project Officer, said:**

*“Key stakeholders are delighted with the quality of what you have produced. They have praised the usability of the tool, the extensive Support Bank and the fact that it feels – rightfully so – like a ‘mature’ product for young people rather than something childlike.”*

Recognising and supporting SLCN helps young people engage in assessments, court processes and practitioner meetings. It also supports participation in education and intervention programmes, helping them understand expectations and take a more active role in their progress.

The Youth Justice SLCN Tool helps bridge a critical gap, giving young people the support they need to be heard and understood.



**NEW PROGRAMME LAUNCH!**



Speech & Language Link

# Speech & Language Support Practitioner Apprenticeship

- ✓ Funded via the Apprenticeship Levy
- ✓ Upskill your TAs, SEND staff, LSAs and HLTAs
- ✓ Coaching, online events, tutor support and training



## Clear, trusted **SLCN SUPPORT** for every secondary school

Speak to our friendly Help Desk team:

**0333 577 0784**

[helpdesk@speechlink.co.uk](mailto:helpdesk@speechlink.co.uk)



Find out how Secondary Language Link can strengthen SLCN support in your setting.

Helping SENCOs and SEND leaders make a real difference.

Secondary Language Link supports over 700 school settings, building staff confidence in identifying and supporting language needs.

SECONDARY  
Language Link

# SAFEGUARDING STUDENTS

with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN)

 SOME READERS MAY FIND THIS CONTENT CHALLENGING



Based on a presentation by **Ann Marie Christian**, international safeguarding consultant and trainer.  
(Edited and adapted for publication.)

**S**tudents with SLCN are particularly vulnerable in safeguarding. While these needs are often seen as learning needs, these individuals often need greater support and understanding to keep safe and protected.

I've worked in a wide range of social work roles, including frontline children's services, schools, youth justice, school-based social work, social work management, and early years. One message is consistent: these children face additional safeguarding risks that are often missed or misunderstood.

### Why are these individuals vulnerable?

Communication difficulties are central to this. Unsafe situations or boundaries may not be recognised due to limited understanding of risk or harm.





If a child doesn't recognise harm, they are unlikely to tell someone about it.

They may also miss social cues and be so highly

motivated to fit in with their peers, they appear willing or compliant in situations where they are being exploited. For example, in cases of child criminal or sexual exploitation, the child may appear to be engaging with activities rather than being harmed and groomed. This often reflects their level of understanding rather than a genuine understanding of consent.

### Barriers to disclosure

We know they may have difficulty disclosing. It might be due to:

-  Their lack of vocabulary
-  Difficulties understanding or expressing ideas related to consent, privacy and body boundaries
-  May struggle to express their emotions clearly
-  Problems with verbal recall of sequences of events alongside memory gaps

As a result, disclosures may be missed or not recognised as such.

### Misinterpreting behaviour

Many signs are misunderstood.

A child who seems unsociable may be seen as shy rather than withdrawn. Aggression may be due to frustration. Anxiety may be interpreted as immaturity. A lack of eye contact may be seen as deliberate avoidance or cultural respect.

Children with additional needs are over-represented in behaviour logs, exclusions and safeguarding concerns. This should prompt reflection: what are we seeing, and how are we interpreting it? Children and young people from minority groups are also overrepresented.

Are we responding to behaviour, or are we seeking to understand what it may be communicating? Do we describe them as attention-seeking rather than attention-needing?

### Bias and adultification

We also need to consider the role of unconscious bias and adultification.

Some students, particularly Black and Brown children, may be adultified.

A tall 13-year-old with additional needs may be seen as intimidating, rather than vulnerable. Behaviour may be judged more harshly, and safeguarding risks may be overlooked.

### Social understanding and risk

Children with SLCN may struggle to read social cues, pick up on danger and be drawn to risky behaviour as they want to be accepted by their peers. This can leave them vulnerable to pressure, manipulation and coercion. They may lack the language or confidence to say no, even if they feel uncomfortable.

Online risks add another layer. Students may misunderstand consent, mistake harmful interactions for friendships, or struggle to report or understand what is happening. These include risks such as sextortion, exploitation and harmful online relationships and many more.

### Making safeguarding accessible

When we are delivering safeguarding teaching and education through our curriculum, are we adjusting our materials so that these children can see it from that different perspective by:

- 💡 Using simple language?
- 💡 Teaching concepts such as consent, boundaries and private body parts?
- 💡 Adapting lessons so students can fully access them?

### Listening to the child

Students need opportunities to express themselves in ways that work for them. We need to take time, avoid leading questions and allow space for children to process. Silence is powerful; it is often helps children to think and respond, so wait rather than try to fill the gap.

We must listen carefully and start from the child's perspective.

### Working together

Keeping children safe in education is everyone's responsibility.

Schools need to work closely with SENCOs, safeguarding leads, educational psychologists and other professionals. Staff should be trained to understand how communication needs affect safeguarding practices.

Training should include relevant case studies and challenge assumptions about behaviour and professionals' own biases. Schools should also engage parents and carers, providing support that

reflects their child's needs, particularly regarding online safety.

Early help is key. Concerns should be shared as soon as they arise, based on clear observations rather than assumptions.

### Final message


Children with SLCN are more vulnerable than many of their peers. They may not be able to communicate clearly what has happened to them, but that does not diminish their need for protection.

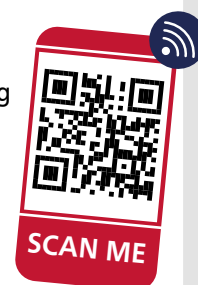
Safeguarding these children means seeing beyond behaviour, understanding their communication needs and recognising the additional barriers they face.

It's our responsibility to be the voice and advocates for these children.

“Unsafe situations or boundaries may not be recognised due to limited understanding of risk or harm.”

Ann Marie Christian inspires and motivates organisations in keeping children and adults safer by bringing safeguarding to the front line and embedded in their daily practice.

To find out more about Ann Marie's training,  scan the QR code.



# INCLUSION BASES IN SECONDARY:

## an opportunity for SLCN-friendly practice



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

**T**he Government's recent SEND white paper *Putting children and young people first\** places renewed emphasis on inclusion bases within mainstream schools – dedicated spaces providing targeted support while keeping learners connected to their school community.

In secondary schools, where needs often become more complex and the curriculum more demanding, linguistically, this presents a significant opportunity. Inclusion bases can become engines of early intervention, relational practice, and effective speech, language and communication support.

However, success depends on more than designating a space. To genuinely meet the needs of learners with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), bases must be intentionally shaped around communication-friendly practice and opportunities for skills development. When this happens, the benefits extend across the whole school.

### Why inclusion bases matter

Secondary schools face rising need, stretched services and curricula that assume strong language skills. Many young people with SLCN, particularly those with developmental language disorder (DLD), social communication needs, or language-linked social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH), struggle to access learning without structured support.

### Inclusion bases offer a strategic response by providing:

- A safe, predictable environment for regulation, language rehearsal and supported transitions
  - Targeted intervention alongside everyday learning
  - Space for collaboration between pastoral, SEND and teaching staff
  - A bridge between mainstream lessons and specialist provision, reducing disengagement and exclusion

### Designing an inclusion base through an SLCN lens

#### 1 Prioritise a communication-supporting environment

A communication-supporting environment is foundational to inclusion. This means combining clear visual support, consistent language scaffolds and a calm, well-organised physical space with staff who understand how to make language accessible.

Together, these elements reduce cognitive load and help learners process, engage and regulate more effectively.

#### 2 Embed explicit language teaching

Inclusion bases are not just places where learning happens – they are places where language is actively taught. This includes pre-teaching key vocabulary, modelling subject-specific language, and supporting understanding through chunking and visualisation.

This explicit approach helps students access the curriculum and develop transferable communication skills.

#### 3 Build staff confidence in SLCN

Effective provision depends on confident, knowledgeable staff. This includes understanding how language impacts learning and behaviour, using consistent scaffolding strategies, and working collaboratively with colleagues and specialists.

When staff feel equipped, support becomes proactive rather than reactive.

#### 4 Create routines that support regulation and communication

Many learners with SLCN find emotional regulation challenging, as language underpins self-talk, problem-solving and social understanding.



Predictable routines, structured opportunities to practise communication, and access to simple visual tools can support regulation and readiness to learn, while strengthening long-term communication skills.

### Whole-school impact

SLCN-friendly inclusion bases are not isolated interventions – they strengthen provision across the school. They can:

- 😊 Improve behaviour and engagement by reducing communication barriers
- 😊 Increase access to the curriculum through strengthened vocabulary and comprehension
- 😊 Build staff confidence, supporting quality-first teaching in all classrooms
- 😊 Foster positive relationships and a sense of belonging
- 😊 Reduce exclusions through earlier identification and intervention

In short, what supports learners with SLCN supports everyone.

### Practical considerations

When setting up an inclusion base, schools should focus on a small number of high-impact actions:

- ✓ Understanding pupil need through assessment and profiling
- ✓ Co-designing the space with students to ensure it feels calm, purposeful and supportive
- ✓ Embedding consistent routines, visuals and communication strategies
- ✓ Timetabling structured language support alongside academic learning

### A chance to reimagine inclusion

Current reforms offer secondary schools a valuable opportunity: to design provision that is relational, communication-supportive and truly inclusive.

By placing speech, language and communication at the heart of inclusion bases, schools can better meet individual needs – while creating environments in which every young person can thrive.

**Want to understand your students' language needs more clearly?**

**Try a free Secondary Language Link trial and complete up to 15 assessments to see what might otherwise go unnoticed.**

\* <https://tinyurl.com/3sxjtwmc>



# ORACY AND SLCN



By **Louise Emerson**, specialist speech and language therapist at Speech & Language Link

**O**n hearing about oracy, my first thought was that so much is speech and language therapy – or at least aspects of communication that we support or see in children and young people (CYP) we work with. My other thought was a concern that those who communicate differently such as using sign language (e.g., BSL, ISL); or who rely on AAC (e.g., communication books, voice output communication aids or supplementary communication systems, e.g., Makaton) would be left out.

Fortunately, with the emphasis on not just talking, but listening and communication too, it provides an inclusive basis to work from. With plenty of evidence to support the idea that literacy and learning lean on oral language skills, it becomes doubly important that our CYP with SLCN are not left out of oracy.

If oracy targets are being written, it will be vital to read any child-specific speech & language reports that have been written; and to be familiar with any targets that have been set by a therapist. Also, if your school has access to a speech and language therapist, it would



## ANXIETY

be beneficial to discuss oracy ideas with them. There is a danger that well-meaning adults may try approaches or techniques which are now proven not to work or to cause distress for specific groups of students.

### Specific barriers to oracy for CYP with SLCN

CYP with SLCN will find different aspects of the Oracy Skills Framework\* harder than other students, for example:

- ⚠ Slower processing of questions and information, making it difficult to follow fast-paced or word-heavy discussions – this can also lead to difficulties staying engaged and may look like poor attention
- ⚠ Not having the vocabulary to explain their ideas or to fully understand the points others are making
- ⚠ Anxiety around talking for different reasons (awareness of stammer/speech sound difficulties, selective (situational) mutism, social anxiety)
- ⚠ Difficulties sequencing words, sentences, and narratives
- ⚠ More mental effort required to share ideas, which means there is less resource for 'flair'
- ⚠ Verbal reasoning skills – making inferences and predictions, problem-solving, or evaluating spoken information
- ⚠ Communication differences that are part of a neurodivergent (ND) profile
- ⚠ Unclear or dysfluent speech which require specific therapeutic approaches to manage

These barriers impact on CYP's abilities to follow points that others are making or add their ideas, and therefore fully engage in talk-based learning. If we do not provide support within the environment for CYP with SLCN, then there is a strong likelihood that the increased emphasis on oracy will lead to frustration, anxiety, avoidance of talk-based tasks, or exclusion from collaborative learning.

### How do we make oracy work for CYP with SLCN?

These are just some ideas which will help students with SLCN be a part of your school's oracy journey:

- ✓ Accurate and timely identification of needs: screening, internal assessment and onward referrals are vital to identify CYP's strengths and difficulties. Accurately identifying CYP's needs means that they can be supported appropriately.

- ✓ Prioritise speech, language and communication across the school: oral language skills are the backbone of literacy and academic success. There are also high levels of SLCN (often missed) amongst CYP with SEMH needs and cared for CYP.
- ✓ Be open to different communication styles and methods and teach the CYP about these. Building a school culture where everybody accepts a range of ways that talk occurs means that communication and connection is valued. This means that in talking tasks, AAC users are given equitable opportunities to participate, and ND learners are not expected to aim for 'looking neurotypical'.
- ✓ Be clear about what you expect from the CYP at different times. If you are talking for learning (i.e. sharing and building on ideas), then focus on the content of what they are sharing, rather than how they are saying it. If your task is focused on performance, then be aware of what supports and extra time your CYP with SLCN will need.
- ✓ Discuss how and when communication breakdowns can occur. Teach developmentally appropriate strategies to manage these.
- ✓ Continue to provide visual support and sentence starters/prompts for talking tasks. For example, picture/symbol supported word banks could help with less familiar vocabulary; phrases like, "So you think...but I think...because..." or, "Adding to that..." would help in discussions.
- ✓ Teach self-advocacy to students and encourage throughout the school. If CYP are being encouraged to self-advocate, then that means adults listening and responding across the day, rather than only listening during set times.

Oracy may initially feel like a challenge to add to the school day; but it is likely that you are already thinking about aspects of it. A focus on oracy improves outcomes for all; it is worth investing the time to ensure that **all** students can participate.



\* See Voice 21 and Oracy Cambridge's four-part model of, including physical, linguistic, cognitive and social & emotional aspects. [tinyurl.com/476ppbph](https://tinyurl.com/476ppbph)

welcome to

# TheLink

## The Link Community quick win

### Make the hidden language visible

Secondary lessons are full of "invisible" language with words like *analyse*, *justify* and *evaluate* that many students with SLCN don't fully understand.

#### Try this:

- Pick one command word per lesson and say it often during the lesson using different examples
- Say it explicitly: "Today, we're going to **evaluate** – that means..."
- Model strong answers out loud
- Keep a growing display or glossary of key terms

#### Why it works:

Making language explicit reduces confusion, builds confidence, and improves the quality of student responses for all students – especially for those who struggle to process complex or abstract language.

## Dates for your diary

We've got just two events left this school year – then it's full steam ahead in October with two of our biggest events yet. If you're coming along, make sure you pop by and say hello. We'd love to see you!

23RD JUNE

**Buckinghamshire's Unlocking Learning through Tech Conference**, The Gateway Conference Centre, Aylesbury

3RD JULY

**nasen LIVE**, The Vox, Birmingham – Stand: Red 5

2ND OCTOBER

**National Education Show**, Utilita Arena, Cardiff, Stand: 15

9-10TH OCTOBER

**Tes SEND Show 2026**, Business Design Centre, London, Stand: E40



Best Practice Network

Best Practice Network is a leading education provider, partnering with schools, trusts and early years settings. Our vision is that every child, regardless of their background, should benefit from an excellent education. We deliver apprenticeships and professional development programmes that help people grow, strengthen practice and make a lasting difference.

[www.bestpracticenet.co.uk](http://www.bestpracticenet.co.uk)



Our Facebook Group  
Speech and Language  
support for schools



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



# Community news

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.

Get in touch with our editor at:  
[claire.chambers@speechlink.co.uk](mailto:claire.chambers@speechlink.co.uk)



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

## Test your knowledge

### Quick quiz: how language-friendly is your classroom?

- A student looks confused when you say, "analyse the text". What's the most helpful response?
  - Give them the answer
  - Move on and come back to them later
  - Give an example of what "analyse" means in this context
- You ask a question and no one answers. What should you try next?
  - Rephrase the question quickly
  - Give students at least 10 seconds' thinking time
  - Answer the question yourself
- A student gives a short or unclear answer. What's the best next step?
  - Say, "That's not quite right"
  - Ask them to try again
  - Model a stronger version of their answer
- Which classroom approach best supports students with SLCN?
  - Using visuals and scaffolds alongside talk
  - Giving lots of verbal instructions at once
  - Keeping instructions brief but abstract
- Why is it important to make key vocabulary explicit?
  - It helps students get higher grades
  - It reduces confusion and supports understanding
  - It fills display boards

1: C 2: B 3: C 4: A 5: B

ANSWERS



# 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.

