The Link PRIMARY

THE SPEECH & LANGUAGE MAGAZINE FOR SCHOOLS

ORACY SPECIAL

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THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF ORACY

ORACY FOR SLCN

AAC AND ORACY

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Editor's Letter

Dear SENCo,

Welcome to our oracy special!

Talk sits at the heart of learning. It shapes how children think, reason, connect with others and make sense of the world around them. In this edition of *The Link Primary*, we explore what high-quality talk looks like in primary classrooms and how we can ensure every child is able to take part.

We begin with specialist speech and language therapist **Yin Collighan** unpacking the building blocks of oracy and the essential speech and language foundations that sit beneath confident classroom talk (page 4). From there, **Dr Kulvarn Atwal** shares ten principles for promoting meaningful classroom talk, offering practical, classroom-tested strategies to help talk become purposeful, inclusive and impactful – see page 6.

This issue also shines a light on pupils whose communication needs can be easy to miss. On page 8, **Dr Hannah Hobson** explores how children with developmental language disorder (DLD) may camouflage their difficulties and why this matters for identification, wellbeing and support. Alongside this, we look at oracy through an inclusive lens – from augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) and oracy, ensuring alternative voices are heard and valued, to oracy for pupils with SLCN, where **Louise Emerson** explores barriers, adjustments and supportive approaches that make talk-based learning accessible for all.

You'll also find familiar favourites, including **One TA to another**, reflections from the classroom floor and **Ask a therapist**, answering common questions with clear, practical guidance.

Whether you're developing a whole-school oracy approach or refining what already happens in your classroom, this special edition is designed to support confident, inclusive communication – so that every child can find and use their voice.

Best wishes,

Claire Chambers

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

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LinkLive

THE LINK LIVE 2026: bringing The Link Community together for speech and language

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.

> "Today has been excellent – very informative, relevant and thought provoking. Loads of suggestions for resources too."
>
> **Delegate from The Link Live 2026**

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.

SCAN ME

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)

Supporting sponsors: Best Practice Network

From speech and language to oracy: GETTING THE BUILDING BLOCKS RIGHT

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

Oracy is becoming an increasingly important part of school life – and for good reason.

It underpins how pupils learn, think and connect with others. When children can explain their ideas, understand what they hear and take part in discussion, they are better able to access the curriculum and engage in learning. At its core, this relies on strong speech and language skills.

Oracy in a primary classroom

Oracy is defined as *"Articulating ideas, developing understanding and engaging with others through speaking, listening and communication"* (Oracy Education Commission, 2024). Oracy itself is comprised of a combination of different skills working together, to help a person talk well across a range of situations. The Voice 21 and University of Cambridge Oracy Skills Framework categorise these into four areas: **physical**, **linguistic**, **cognitive** and **social and emotional skills**.

- **PHYSICAL SKILLS** include how children use their voice and body to communicate, for example, speaking clearly, using the right volume and showing meaning through expression and gesture.
- **LINGUISTIC SKILLS** are about the words and sentences children use, including vocabulary, grammar and choosing language that fits the situation.
- **COGNITIVE SKILLS** help children organise their thoughts, explain their ideas and respond to what others are saying.
- **SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS** support successful interaction and include listening, taking turns, showing empathy and building the confidence to speak.

Some of these skills are demonstrated incidentally, for example, when children share their news in class, explain how they solved a maths equation or chat to their partner. These moments are valuable but can be brief and not all children can take part equally.

Teaching oracy skills makes this more consistent. It involves planned opportunities for pupils to practise specific speaking and listening skills, such as explaining reasoning, discussing ideas and presenting to others, with enough structure to support every child to take part.

Benefits of oracy practice

Using oracy practice to support reading and writing can make these areas come to life. With oracy lessons around reading, for example, children are better able to make sense of their learning and gain a richer understanding of the text by talking it through. Around writing – a story, for example – oracy practice can help a child to organise their thoughts into a cohesive structure and add more colour by incorporating others' spoken ideas.

Oracy practice also supports social development. Skills such as listening, taking turns, explaining ideas and understanding different viewpoints help children build friendships, grow in confidence and take an active role in the classroom.

> "Developing these foundations means that children are better able to join in, build on others' ideas and engage in meaningful discussion."

These are not just skills for school. A strong oracy skill set remains highly valued in adult life and the workplace, as noted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2016), meaning the benefits of practice extend well beyond the classroom.

The foundations beneath oracy

As schools place increasing value on discussion, storytelling and pupil voice, we must remember that strong oracy is built on strong foundations in speech and language. This growing focus is reflected more widely, including in the Oracy Education Commission report '*We Need to Talk*' and the SEND reform proposals in '*Every Child Achieving and Thriving*' (2026), both of which highlight the importance of spoken language and early support in mainstream classrooms.

Supporting speech and language skills – such as developing speech sounds, teaching children a wide and rich vocabulary, reinforcing sentence structure and helping children with their language understanding – helps children to participate well in oracy. These fundamental skills give children the tools they need to shape their thinking into clear contributions. Developing these foundations means that children are better able to join in, build on others' ideas and engage in meaningful discussion. They are more likely to share their thoughts, communicate with confidence and take an active role in learning, which creates a positive feedback loop to their speech and language skills.

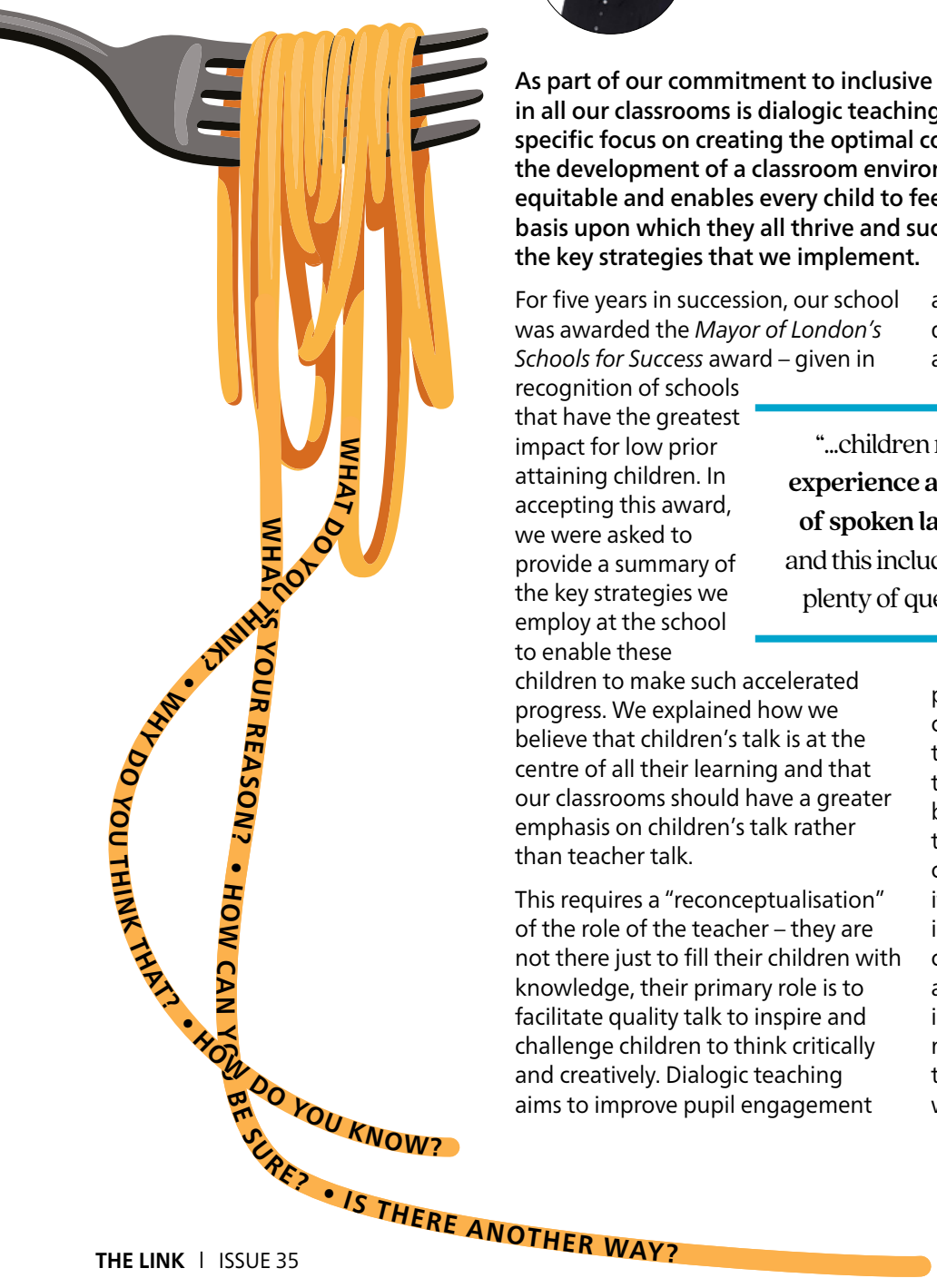
Schools therefore have a vital role to play in strengthening speech and language alongside providing purposeful oracy practice, so that more children are able to participate, contribute and feel successful as communicators. With the renewed energy around oracy and spoken language there is a real sense that now is the time to act.

Ready to build stronger oracy in your classroom? Speech Link and Language Link give you the tools to identify needs early and support SLCN across your setting.

SCAN ME

10 PRINCIPLES FOR PROMOTING MEANINGFUL CLASSROOM TALK

By **Dr. Kulvarn Atwal**, principal learning leader of The Thinking Schools Federation



As part of our commitment to inclusive practice, our pedagogical approach in all our classrooms is dialogic teaching. We believe that through a specific focus on creating the optimal conditions for pupil talk, we enable the development of a classroom environment that is both inclusive and equitable and enables every child to feel valued and listened to. This is the basis upon which they all thrive and succeed. In this article, I detail some of the key strategies that we implement.

For five years in succession, our school was awarded the *Mayor of London's Schools for Success* award – given in recognition of schools that have the greatest impact for low prior attaining children. In accepting this award, we were asked to provide a summary of the key strategies we employ at the school to enable these children to make such accelerated progress. We explained how we believe that children's talk is at the centre of all their learning and that our classrooms should have a greater emphasis on children's talk rather than teacher talk.

This requires a "reconceptualisation" of the role of the teacher – they are not there just to fill their children with knowledge, their primary role is to facilitate quality talk to inspire and challenge children to think critically and creatively. Dialogic teaching aims to improve pupil engagement and attainment by improving the quality of classroom talk. Teachers adopt strategies that enable pupils to reason, discuss, argue and explain rather than merely respond.

> "...children need to **experience a rich diet of spoken language,** and this includes asking plenty of questions."

This kind of talk is not just any talk – it breaks away from the "question-answer" and "listen-tell" routines that typify traditional teaching practices. Instead, we encourage our children to think deeply and to justify their responses. This enables them to give extended responses and to build on each other's ideas. Dialogic teaching impacts positively on all children. However, in our experience, it has a significant and sustained impact on low prior attaining children. These are the children who are facing the greatest challenges in our education system and who most benefit from the best quality teaching experiences. As a staff team, we have engaged in collaborative

action research to identify how best to develop a learning environment in our school that authentically values and promotes children's talk. We identified 10 key principles.

1 Give children confidence and opportunities to ask questions

Children need to experience a rich diet of spoken language, and this includes asking plenty of questions. If we want our children to be talking about their learning and posing questions, we need to provide them with the opportunity – and the skills – to do so.

2 Allow time for paired and group discussion

It is essential for children to have opportunities to work collaboratively and to learn from each other. Planning time into lessons for "mini-reviews" – where children can use discussion to summarise and link learning – is a good way to get groups, or the whole class, talking.

3 Use a range of questioning strategies

Lessons should provide a range of opportunities to talk, including the use of the following strategies:

- ✓ All pupils are given wait time – the chance to think before answering a question
- ✓ No hands are raised. Instead, the teacher selects pupils to answer (some pupils may need extra processing time, so ask the question and return to them later)
- ✓ Pupils are encouraged to discuss with a group or a partner to help them formulate an answer
- ✓ The teacher involves several pupils in the answer to a single question, creating the opportunity for discussion through phrases such as "What do you think?", "Do you agree with that answer?", "Who would like to build on that response?"
- ✓ Incorrect answers are discussed to develop understanding
- ✓ Time is given for pupils to formulate questions

4 Ask children how they feel

It is always important to ask our pupils how they feel about their learning, as this gives us an idea of how they think and see what they do and don't know. Regular reflection points in lessons are invaluable to support pupil progress.

5 Ask open-ended questions

Open-ended questions can help deepen children's understanding and require them to reflect (rather than there being one single "right answer"). We can use the following:

- **What do you think?**
- **Why do you think that?**
- **How do you know?**
- **What is your reason?**
- **How can you be sure?**
- **Is there another way?**

Some children who have language needs might struggle with more complex questions; therefore, it is important to tailor the level of questioning to suit the child.

6 Promote a balance of talk between teacher and pupils

Traditionally, in most situations in the classroom, either the teacher or the pupil is passive. But in a dialogic classroom, pupils actively engage and teachers constructively intervene.

7 Introduce a Talk Charter

At the beginning of the year, the teacher discusses with pupils why they feel talk is important to their learning. What skills demonstrate excellent talk and dialogue? Children are given interactive activities to help identify these skills. The key findings are put on display and regularly referred to.

8 Keep scaffolding to the minimum level for each child

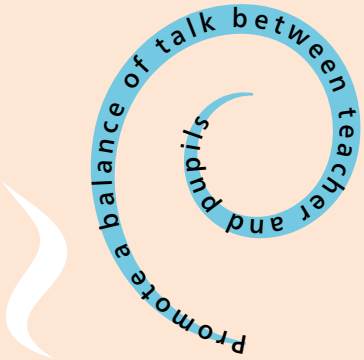
Pupils need the opportunity to explore and discover new learning for themselves. They need the time to think things through rather than having a consistently high level of scaffolding and prompting.

9 Discuss misconceptions

Pupils need to be able to identify their own misconceptions and be given the opportunity to talk these through. This must be within a climate where all pupils feel safe to make mistakes and develop from these.

10 Model thoughts out loud

It is essential that we act as role models for our pupils, demonstrating critical-thinking skills and effective use of language. Pupils especially benefit from the modelling of inter-thinking between adults in the classroom.



CAMOUF

COMMUNICATION NEEDS

– how children with DLD hide in plain sight

By **Dr Hannah Hobson**, University of York

The child who copies another's work. The pupil who gets their head down and looks busy but produces very little output. The student who nods along during your instructions, and maybe even says "yes" when asked if they understand what they are supposed to do… only for them to do something quite different.

What ties these different behaviours together? They could all be forms of camouflaging unrecognised language needs, especially for children with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD), a common but under-recognised neurodevelopmental condition that impacts children's language development, affecting around 7% of school-age children.

"Masking" or "camouflaging" have been much talked about in relation to autism. The terms capture what happens when a neurodivergent person changes their behaviour to minimise their differences. For autistic people, this might mean imitating others' body language, practising facial expressions in the mirror, or making deliberate eye contact, even if it feels uncomfortable. While masking may mean that autistic people "pass" as neurotypical, masking all day is exhausting, detrimental to mental health, and disruptive to a person's sense of identity.

However, these behaviours are not unique to autism. Our research group recently conducted interviews with speech and language therapists, parents, and young people with DLD to explore whether camouflaging was something that also happened in DLD. The answer was yes, children with DLD do camouflage. Furthermore, participants were concerned that camouflaging could delay recognition of children's language needs, and thereby interventions and support - and that the lack of help coupled with the fatigue of camouflaging itself could negatively affect children's wellbeing.

> "I don't want to be any more different than anyone else, and like I don't wanna stand out."
>
> Young person with DLD

When we asked people what sorts of behaviours children and young people did that masked their language needs, we found that camouflaging had many different forms, and the nature of a child's camouflaging changes across development: strategies that work for a young child in primary school may not work for an older child in secondary. However, some common behaviours included avoiding scenarios with high language demands, copying others, and nodding along despite not following a conversation. Children also had conversational techniques to end interactions that had become too difficult and would steer conversational partners towards topics children knew well, as they had a better grasp of the topic vocabulary and would be more likely to have a successful interaction (we expect this may make some children with language needs appear autistic, as it may seem as though they had "restricted and repetitive interests").

Since these interviews, we have developed a parent-report questionnaire, our first attempt to measure camouflaging of communication needs. We tested out this measure in an initial project of 77 families, half of whom were parents of children with DLD, half of whom had children without DLD. Parents of children with DLD scored significantly higher on the camouflaging measure, and the amount a child camouflaged was correlated with their scores on depression and anxiety, where more camouflaging was associated with higher mental health problems, precisely the relationship that has been reported in studies of autistic masking.

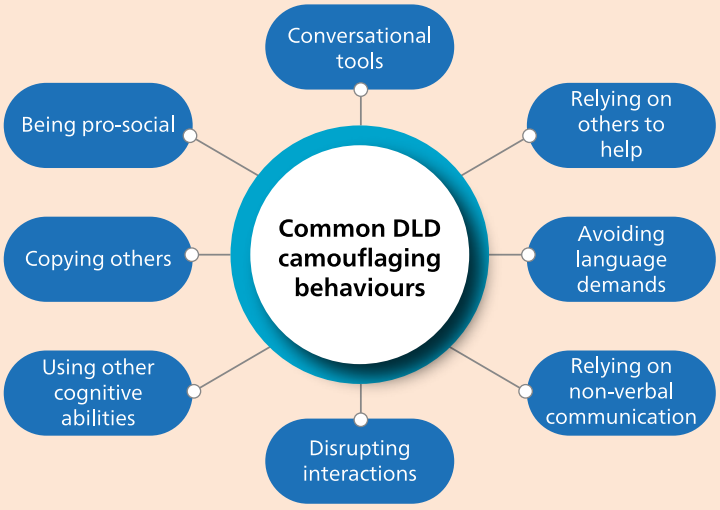
What can and should be done about camouflaging? Firstly, it is important to realise that these behaviours have been learned through experience: children have picked up that exposing their language needs, for example by saying they don't understand or by giving a wrong answer, is undesirable, and so they adopt strategies to

LAGING

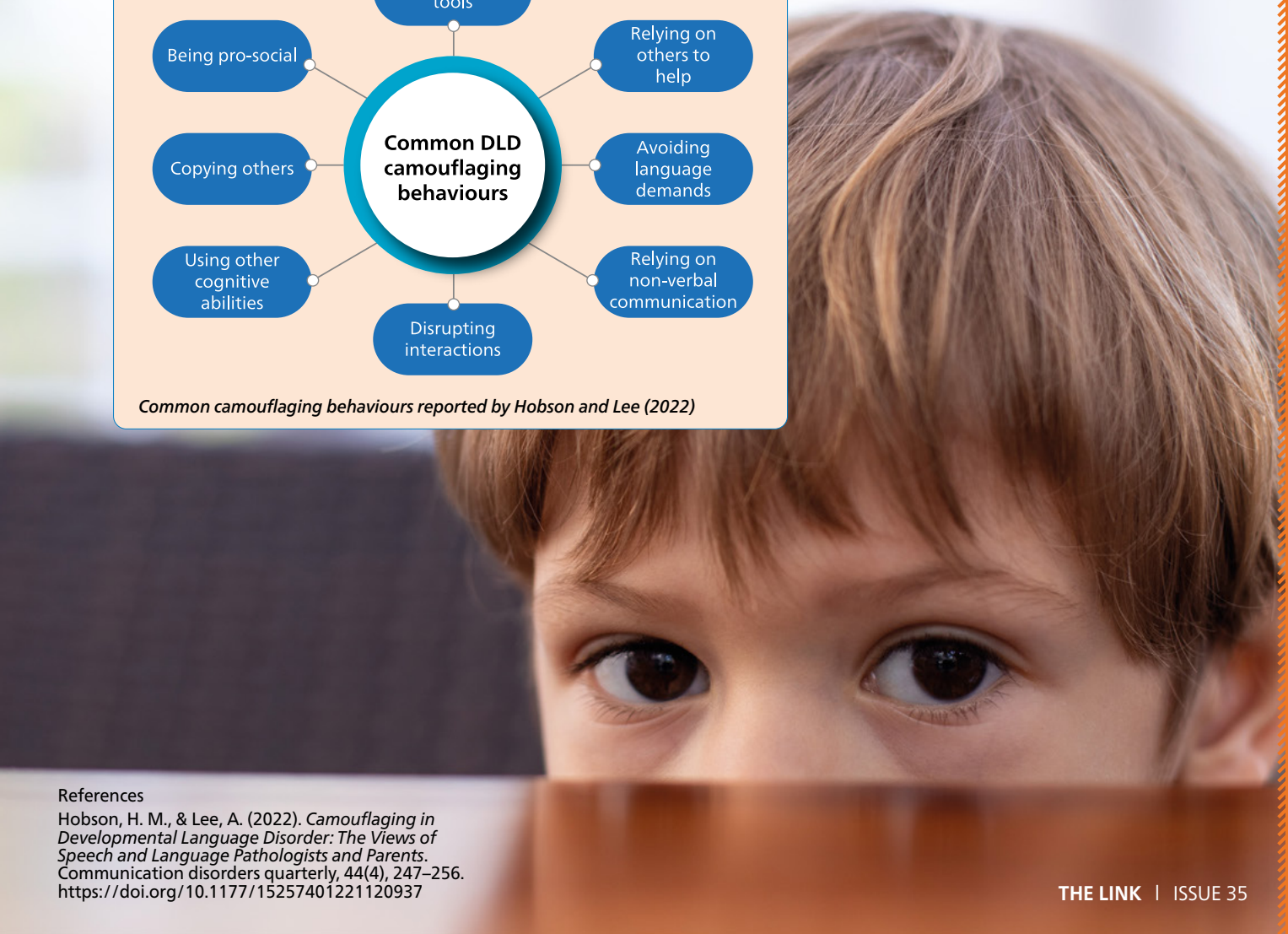
hide their difficulties (though they may not be fully aware of what they are doing). Pointing out the camouflaging and expecting children to stop doing them is unlikely to be helpful, if these behaviours are what children have adopted to feel safe. Instead, we suggest creating spaces in which children feel comfortable to show their needs. This could include deliberate modelling by adults of not understanding and asking for help, for example asking someone to say something again or in a different way.

Secondly, when we spoke to young people and their parents, they felt that others' limited understanding of DLD contributed to camouflaging. Here, proper training is needed to support staff to not just have heard about DLD, but to understand and appreciate its long-term impact on children. Research tells us that unfortunately many professionals still hold inaccurate views about DLD: for example, in a recent survey of 262 teachers, 81% thought that DLD was something that would resolve by adulthood or after speech and language intervention, but DLD is a lifelong neurotype (like autism), that requires ongoing support in the classroom. Incorrect knowledge about DLD may mean suitable adaptations are not made, preventing students with DLD from accessing their learning and feeling comfortable being themselves in the classroom.

If you or your team would like training on this topic, the EMERALD lab is hosting workshops this summer about camouflaging. If you'd be interested in receiving information about these events, please contact Dr Hannah Hobson. You can also find updates about our camouflaging research and new camouflaging measures here: https://osf.io/s2qv8/.



Common camouflaging behaviours reported by Hobson and Lee (2022)



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When slang leaves the playground

By **Claire Chambers**, The Link editor

"Miss, that picture is so… slay!" said Billy as we walked past the new display in the hall on our way back from morning break. I stopped for a second. *Slay?* Did he mean that he liked it? Was it a good or a bad thing? Of course, I just nodded with a half-smile (in case it meant good) while making a note to look up what it meant later.

Working at a school you will be used to new words appearing in the classroom. Some fade away, like *'peng'* and *'sick'* and some are around long enough to end up in the dictionary - apparently *'skibidi'*, *'delulu'* and *'tradwife'* are examples - who knew?

So, while we might find the latest slang confusing and probably a bit annoying, it's often a sign of healthy, creative language development.

So how does slang become a 'real' word?

Many words, now considered standard English, started life as informal slang. What makes the difference? Frequency, usefulness and flexibility. If a word:

- is used widely
- fills a gap in meaning
- spreads beyond one age group

…it has a good chance of sticking around.

Children are brilliant at creating and sharing language that fits their world. When we listen a bit closer to their chats, rather than correcting straight away, we get a front row seat to how children are shaping language themselves.

Slang from the past that made it into the dictionary

Here are some words that older generations once complained about, that we now use without thinking:

- **Cool** – once teenage slang, now universally accepted
- **Hang out** – informal phrasing that became mainstream
- **Kid** – originally slang for a child (and once considered rude)!
- **Geek** – once an insult, now proudly claimed
- **OK** – started as playful slang and became global

All these words were originally dismissed as *"not proper English"*.

Should we correct slang use?

Constant correction can shut down talk. When pupils feel judged for how they speak, they may stop contributing altogether, especially those with speech, language and communication needs.

Instead of correcting, we can:

Model alternatives: If the pupil says ***'slay'***, we can respond, "Yes, that was ***'impressive'***."

Talk about context: "That word works on the **playground**, what could we say that would work in our **writing**?"

This supports oracy development while still teaching pupils how to switch between informal speech and formal language.

Some of the words we hear this year may disappear by next term. Others just might be the dictionary entries of the future.

A word of warning: if you're trying to be *"down with the kids"*, borrowing their lingo is **never** cool. Often, it comes across as **cheugy,** a **big yike**, or just plain **ick**. Take the following; a brave, but deeply misguided attempt to speak 'pupil', delivered by someone who should know better (me).

"If this article doesn't slay, that's on me being locked in too hard and coming out well and truly cooked. Skibidi."

I rest my case!

ASK A Therapist

Q: What are the top oracy activities for the primary classroom?

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

A: Oracy is a hot topic and one that deserves priority. We are glad to see that it has been formally added to the curriculum. The ability to articulate ideas, develop understanding and engage with others through speaking and listening are vital skills for life and for learning.

Getting the foundations right

Oracy starts with a safe space to talk and listen. This is established through creating clear ground rules, devised and agreed in a classroom, giving all learners a chance to talk, express themselves and be heard, and responsibility lies with every member of the class to make sure that this happens. All students, and particularly those with SLCN, benefit from visual support and structure within open conversations like these. Marking turns and setting clear expectations is another foundation of a safe talking space.

Here are 3 ideas of how you can support oracy in your classroom:

1 The idea throwdown

An *idea throwdown* is a big, thoughtful conversation where you:

- ✓ Ask questions about what you heard
- ✓ Explain your thinking
- ✓ Listen to other people's ideas
- ✓ Build on what others say, instead of arguing or trying to "win"

Everyone gets a chance to join in.

One person might take the lead on noting down the group's thoughts and ideas using key words, symbols or drawings.

When might you use it?

- Predicting what might happen in an investigation
- Exploring character motivation
- Exploring different strategies to solve a maths problem

2 Verbal volleyball

Verbal volleyball is a form of exploratory talk. It is a back-and-forth conversation. You might do this one-to-one or working in teams:

- ✓ One person, or team starts by saying a sentence or idea

- ✓ The other person, or team replies quickly with something connected to what was just said
- ✓ The first group responds again

It's all about quick thinking, staying focused and building on what the other person says.

When might you use it?

- Debating a character in English
- Exploring different viewpoints in history
- Vocabulary expansion – firing back a connected word

3 The insight exchange

This is a way of structuring formal speaking opportunities. During insight exchange:

- ✓ Small teams work together to discuss and share ideas or come up with potential solutions to a problem
- ✓ The teams then share their thoughts and ideas in a short presentation
- ✓ The team might share pictures, key words or even act out their idea, as well as sharing it verbally

Everyone on the team can have a role in the presentation – the talking must be shared out.

When might you use it?

- Presenting a character's perspective
- Explaining the results of an investigation
- Explaining the significance of an event
- Sharing strategies to solve a problem
- Evaluating team tactics

If talk is valued and given a bit of structure, you start to hear pupils express their thoughts more clearly. Structured oracy activities help children learn how to explain their ideas, listen to others and build on what's been said. When this becomes part of everyday teaching, confidence grows and understanding deepens, with more pupils feeling able to join in.

Making oracy AAC-inclusive: Ensuring every voice is heard

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

Oracy *must* work for everybody. It shouldn't just be something that works for those who communicate through spoken word.

For some pupils, talking isn't their main way of communicating; augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) is. They might use signing, an eye-pointing frame, buttons, a book or a device (voice output communication aid – VOCA). For these children, AAC is their voice.

Oracy isn't just talk

Oracy is about expressing ideas, listening, responding and being part of shared thinking. Many AAC users can do all of that, just by different means. They might, for example:

- Build a sentence using symbols
- Select key words to join in
- Use pre-prepared phrases to contribute
- Respond using a device, communication book or sign

Build in time

Using AAC often takes longer, due to the nature of the system and sometimes the user may need extra time due to motor or processing demands. This means that, unfortunately, AAC users might get left out during talk sessions, especially if the conversation is very fast-paced.

Here is where small shifts can make a big difference. You can:

- ✓ Pause after asking a question
- ✓ Signal that you'll come back to a pupil
- ✓ Slow the pace of turn-taking
- ✓ Make thinking time visible and expected

Plan talk with AAC in mind

Oracy activities often rely on quick responses. Think-pair-share, debates and talking games can all work, but will need adapting. Tasks don't necessarily need to be simplified, just made more accessible.

Before the lesson:

- ✓ Ensure VOCAs/devices remain updated with a range of core and fringe (topic) vocabulary, and ensure users are comfortable with navigating to new words
- ✓ Provide topic-specific communication boards
- ✓ Liaise with speech and language therapy (SaLT) to see how communication targets can be generalised into the classroom
- ✓ Plan how AAC users can take turns to lead and contribute

And during the lesson:

- ✓ Allow alternative ways to respond (pointing, selecting, pre-programmed phrases)
- ✓ Pair pupils thoughtfully so communication is supported, not rushed
- ✓ Model how to include and wait

Model, don't just expect

AAC use should always be normalised in the class. If adults use and value it too, it supports understanding and becomes an integral part of classroom talk – rather than considered an "extra".

That might look like:

- ✓ Pointing to symbols as you speak
- ✓ Using a pupil's device to model a response
- ✓ Acknowledging AAC contributions in the same way as spoken ones

Set up the environment for AAC success

AAC access must be built into the environment. It's vital that pupils can access their voice at all times. So, check – for example:

- Are their tools within reach?
- Is key vocabulary available at a glance?
- Are devices charged and ready to use?

Positioning is so important too. AAC users must be able to see others and be seen themselves: group layouts, seating and movement around the room all make a difference as to whether communication feels easy or effortful.

Rethink what participation looks like

For oracy practice to truly work in the classroom. we must give all children the opportunity to take part. Importantly, not every contribution needs to be a full sentence, spoken out loud or in the moment.

Participation might be:

- ✓ Selecting a key word
- ✓ Agreeing or disagreeing
- ✓ Building on someone else's idea using a phrase
- ✓ Contributing after a delay

Being mindful and considerate of including all voices, including AAC, creates a culture of respect and understanding within the classroom, which then shines through everyone's values. If pupils see communication embraced in all its forms, time given without pressure and all contributions accepted, they're likely to develop an inclusive mindset which can be carried into other aspects of their lives.

Building in AAC from the start allows the classroom to be a communication-rich zone, opening up opportunities for more pupils to express their views and take part.

This, in itself, is a vital part of practice.

MORE INFO

If you need any further, more tailored guidance about how to be AAC-inclusive in your oracy lessons, or across any aspect of classroom teaching, do have a chat with your AAC specialist team or local speech and language therapy service.

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

Oracy and SLCN

"Building a school culture where everybody accepts a range of ways that talk occurs means that communication and connection is valued."

On 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 we work with. My other thought was a concern that children 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 children with SLCN are not left out of oracy.

If oracy targets are being written, it will be vital to read any child-specific speech and 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 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 pupils.

Specific barriers to oracy for children with SLCN

Children with SLCN will find different aspects of the oracy skills framework harder than other pupils, 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 difficulties – e.g., 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 children'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 children with SLCN, 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 children with SLCN?

These will help pupils 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 children's strengths and difficulties. Accurately identifying children'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 children with SEMH needs and cared for children.
- ✓ Be open to different communication styles and methods and teach the children 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 children 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 children 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 "I agree with X…because…" or "I haven't decided because…" would help in discussions.
- ✓ Teach self-advocacy to pupils and encourage throughout the school. If children 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 ensuring that **all** pupils are able to participate.

The Link PRIMARY welcome to 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 Little Link, Speech Link and Language link have 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

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

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

The Link Community quick win!

Got five minutes? Here's one simple way to support speech, language and oracy today:

Pause and rephrase.

When a pupil gives a response that's almost there, repeat it back using a clear, complete sentence, without correcting or drawing attention to the error. You're modelling language, not interrupting thinking.

Build small habits, make a big impact!

Want more like this?

The Link Community is full of practical ideas, expert guidance and classroom-ready strategies. Explore here:

SCAN ME

OUR FACEBOOK GROUP: SPEECH AND LANGUAGE SUPPORT FOR SCHOOLS

Join the conversation with 4k 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.

Quick Quiz

1) You ask a question and… no response. Best next move?

A) Repeat it louder
B) Give 5-10 seconds thinking time
C) Pick someone straight away

2) You introduce a new word (e.g., "enormous"). What helps it stick best?

A) Use it once in a sentence
B) Put it on the wall and move on
C) Use it, act it, spot it and reuse it all week

3) Which statement is true?

A) AAC is only for children who don't talk
B) AAC can support spoken language (it doesn't stop it)
C) AAC should be used only when everything else has failed

Answers: 1 = B 2=C 3=B

Dates for your diary

We've got just one event 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 over 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

The Little Link Toolkit is now CPD UK Certified

We're excited to share that the Little Link Toolkit is now CPD UK Certified, giving schools confidence that their staff training is structured, rigorous and quality assured.

We've designed the Toolkit to be used in a staff training session, or over a series of shorter group sessions. The three-part Toolkit supports professional learning from start to finish. It includes a practitioner progress measure and self-evaluation questionnaire, helping staff reflect on their confidence and development over time.

Each section is supported by short videos and practical activities, with space to capture learning and next steps in your Learning Log. It's flexible, accessible and designed to fit into real nursery life.

CPD CERTIFIED
The CPD Certification Service
Collective Mark

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A new standard in assessing the understanding of language for **school entry**

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You spoke. We listened. Then made assessing faster.

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Our school entry Infant Language Link assessment is fun, quick and easily accessible. It is audio supported and looks at understanding of language across key areas including concept vocabulary, instructions and sentence structures.

- Quick to complete – 2 out of 3 children in an average class complete the screen in only 10 minutes
- More accurate – two assessments at different time points in the year provide more accuracy in measuring children's language ability for their age at that point in the year
- Instant results – enabling you to provide support at the right level; recommended class and small group interventions, plus flagged children who need more specialist support
- Robust progress measures – track children's language progress across the year

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