

Adaptive teaching methods for speech, language and communication needs

Torbay Educational Psychology Service

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TORBAY COUNCIL

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Agenda

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02	Understanding SLCN and working memory
03	Co-occurring needs
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Why Language Matters in the Classroom

Language underpins learning

- Children rely on language to access all subjects
- Children need strong language skills to understand instructions, ideas and questions

Language supports thinking

- Children use language to reason, solve problems and explain ideas

Language enables social interaction

- Builds relationships, supports group work and helps children navigate social situations

Language guides behaviour and emotions

- Helps children express feelings, ask for help and understand expectations

Language is the foundation of literacy

- Vocabulary, grammar and phonological skills underpin reading and writing



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Understanding SLCN

What is SLCN?

SLCN = Speech, Language and Communication Needs
A broad term describing difficulties with one or more aspects of communication.

Children with SLCN may have difficulties with:

- Understanding spoken language
- Expressing themselves clearly
- Using language socially (e.g., turn-taking, staying on topic)
- Processing verbal information

Fact:

Around one in ten children, roughly 2 or 3 in every class, have ongoing SLCN. Also, as many as half of pupils begin school with some level of language delay. Providing early, targeted support can have a powerful impact on their progress, confidence, and overall well-being.

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Working Memory and SLCN

Role of Working Memory

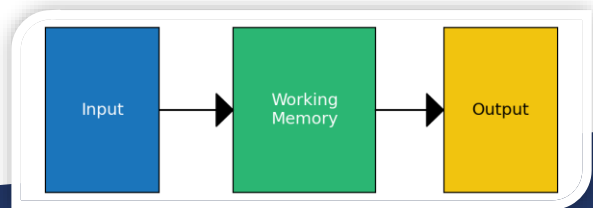
Working memory enables children to temporarily hold and use information necessary for tasks and learning.

SLCN Impact on Memory

Children with SLCN often have reduced working memory capacity, causing difficulty with complex sentences and instructions.

Supporting Working Memory

Using chunking, visuals, and extra time helps reduce cognitive overload and supports pupil success.



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Co-occurring Difficulties

- **Learning difficulties**
 - Language challenges affect reading, writing and learning
- **Trauma**
 - Difficulties in recalling memories, sequencing events, and forming coherent narratives
- **Social and emotional mental health (SEMH) needs**
 - Frustration, low confidence, relationship difficulties
- **Autism**
 - Variations in social communication and interaction
- **Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)**
 - Differences in attention and processing
- **Literacy difficulties (e.g., dyslexia)**
 - Phonological and vocabulary weaknesses affecting reading and spelling

Fact:

Approximately 10% of children have SLCN and many also present with additional or co-occurring needs.

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Developmental Language Disorder (DLD)

Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) is a long-term condition that affects how children understand and use spoken language. It is not caused by hearing loss, general learning disability, or other known biomedical conditions.

DLD is often missed because:

- It presents differently in different people
- DLD changes over time
- DLD often looks like something else
- DLD is unseen
- Statistics indicate 8% DLD vs 1%ASC

The children and young people who are at the greatest risk of school exclusion are those with unidentified DLD.

Short video made by Lily Farringdon, a young woman diagnosed with DLD at age 15yrs:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rwOfkj0dj_0

Short video on the impact of DLD: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ekE1cpZQgQo>

Summary and podcast on DLD and behaviour difficulties:

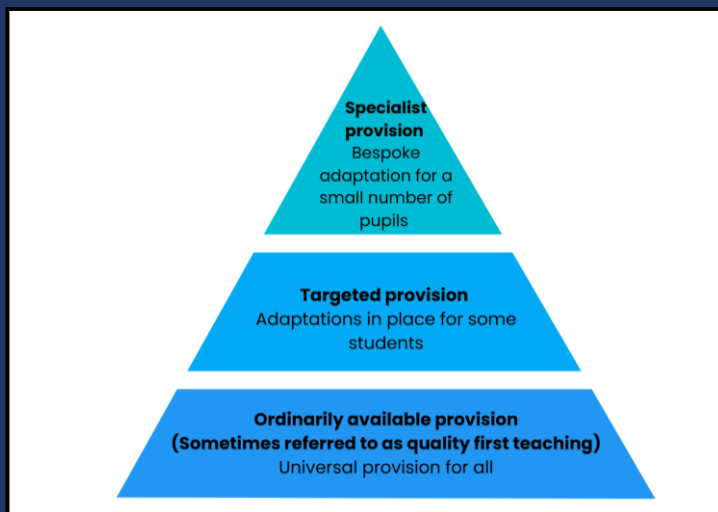
<https://www.tes.com/news/how-misbehaviour-can-be-sign-language-disorder>



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Adaptive Teaching

Adaptive teaching is broken down into three levels:



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Level 1 – Ordinarily Available Provision (Sometimes referred to as quality first teaching)

Ordinary provision refers to the **everyday, high-quality teaching strategies** that support children’s speech, language and communication needs **without needing specialist input or a formal diagnosis**. These are universal approaches that help all learners but are essential for pupils with SLCN.

These simple adaptations form part of the school’s **universal offer** and ensure children with identified or unidentified SLCN can access learning, take part in discussions, and feel successful in the classroom.

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Evidence based recommendations for SLCN at Level 1: Ordinarily available provision/quality first teaching

1. Rich oral language environment
2. Minimise cognitive load (i.e. chunking)
3. Reduce background noise
4. Reduce sensory information
5. Adults to use ‘Recasting’ in everyday interactions
6. Explicitly teach new vocabulary
7. Use Mediated Learning strategies

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5 Core Strategies for Adaptive Teaching & SLCN



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1 – Create a Communication-Friendly Environment

What it means: Reduce background noise, visual clutter, and unpredictability so the child does not have to work as hard to understand language.

Use in the classroom:

- **Noise reduction:** Close the door during group work, seat the child away from doors or windows, or use soft furnishings to absorb sound.
- **Visual clarity:** Keep only the materials needed for the current activity on the table; cover busy displays with a plain cloth during instruction.
- **Encourage Interaction and collaboration.** Use pair and group work to promote peer-to-peer talk.
- **Consistent signals:** Use the same gesture or visual card to indicate transitions (e.g., a picture of a book for “reading time”).

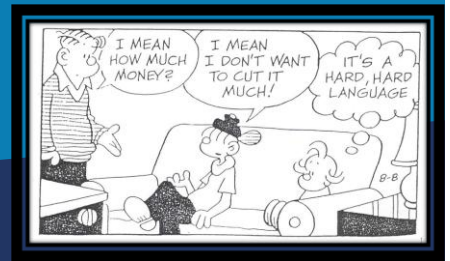
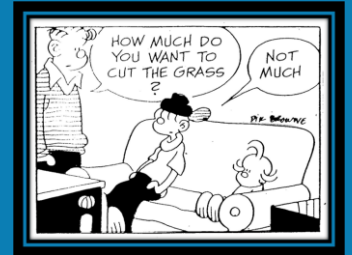
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2 – Use clear, simple language and check understanding

What it means: Communicate in a way that is easy to follow and actively confirm that pupils have understood what to do.

Use in the classroom:

- **Use short, clear sentences.** Give one step at a time: "Put your homework in the tray. Then get your coat."
- **Avoid or explain idioms and rhetorical questions.** Avoid phrases like "hit the ground running."
- **Highlight key words.** Stress the important parts: "Cut the paper. Glue the picture."
- **Check understanding.** Ask the child to show you, act it out, or repeat the instruction in their own words.



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3 – Support language with visuals and modelling














What it means: Reinforce spoken language by showing it, demonstrating it, and giving pupils concrete examples to copy or adapt.

Use in the classroom :

- Pair spoken instructions with pictures, symbols, gestures, or written keywords.
- Model the sentence structure you want the pupil to use (e.g., "You could say...") and encourage them to repeat or adapt it.
- Provide worked examples or sentence starters before asking pupils to produce their own ideas.

Fact:

We retain approximately 10-20% of written or spoken information, but around 65% of the information when it is presented visually.

 Friday	
 Mrs Smith	 classroom
 Mr Patel	 table work
 Mr Patel	 sensory room
 friends	 lunch
 Mrs Smith	 hall
 Parents	 home

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Case Scenario 1: "The Quiet Child"

What might we see:

- Listens well
- Rarely answers questions
- Work is incomplete

"I need more time to think before I answer."

Reflective questions:

- Is the child understanding the language?
- How much verbal information is given at once?
- What visuals could support this lesson?

The quiet child who observes carefully and thrives with visual structure.

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Case Scenario 2: "The Challenging Behaviour"

What might we see?

- Appears oppositional
- Struggles to follow instructions
- Easily frustrated

"Sometimes I get lost when there are too many steps."

Reflective questions:

- Is behaviour masking language difficulty?
- Are instructions clear and chunked?
- How predictable is the classroom routine?

The child with big ideas who needs support to organise language

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Think Behaviour: Think Language



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Summary



Language is the Foundation

Everything in the classroom—learning, behaviour, friendships, and emotional regulation—relies on language. When we strengthen communication, we strengthen a child’s ability to thrive.



Five Core Strategies = Everyday Success

Clear language, chunked instructions, visuals, processing time, and explicit vocabulary teaching create classrooms where pupils feel confident and included.



Behaviour is Communication

Quietness, frustration, or oppositional behaviour may signal language difficulty, not deliberate non-compliance. When we “think behaviour = think language,” we uncover the real barriers.

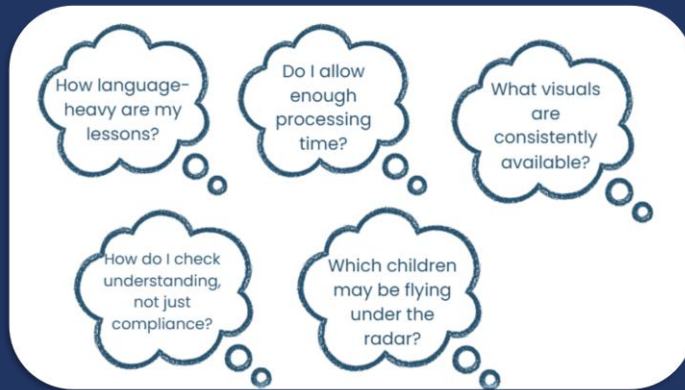


Consistency Matters

Small, predictable adjustments used by all adults reduce cognitive load, boost understanding, and create stability.

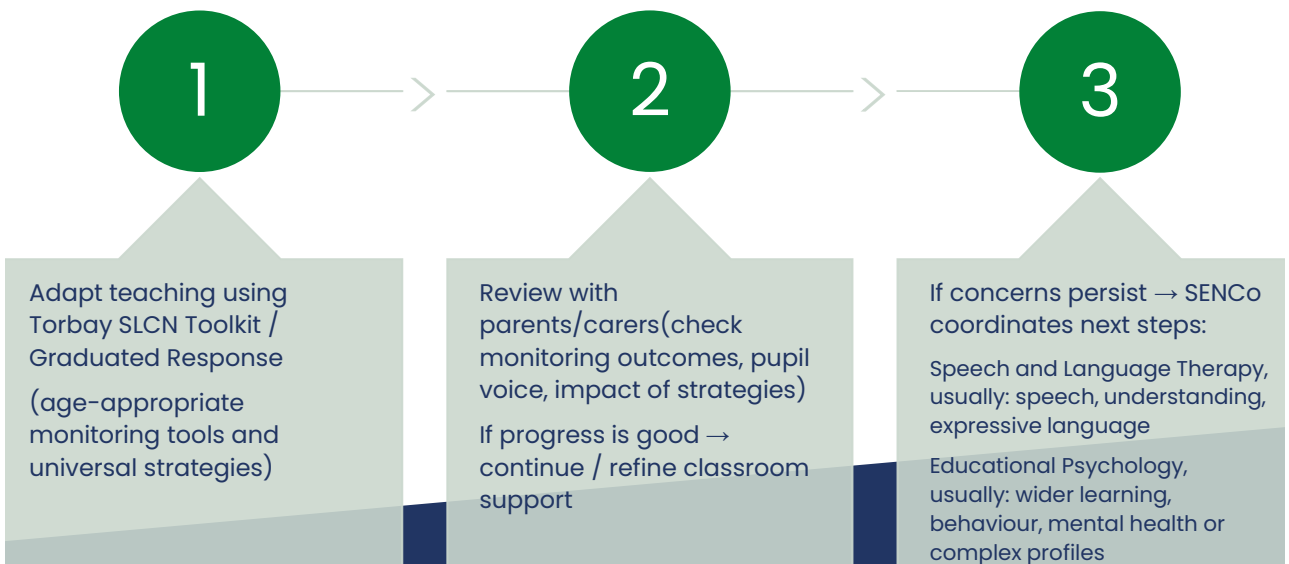
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Reflecting on Our Practice



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Steps to follow for concerns about speech, language or communication



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Plain-Language Glossary (Easy-to-Understand Explanations)

Auditory processing	How the brain makes sense of what it hears. Some children hear the words but need more time to understand them.
Chunking	Breaking information into smaller, easier pieces so it is simpler to understand and remember.
Cognitive load	How hard the brain has to work to understand something. When too much is happening at once, the brain becomes overloaded.
Dual-coding	Using pictures and words together to help understanding. Seeing and hearing information at the same time makes information easier to remember.
Emotional regulation	How children understand, express, and manage their feelings in healthy ways.
Executive functioning	The brain's 'manager' – helps with planning, organising, paying attention, and staying on track.
Figurative or idiomatic language	Phrases that don't mean exactly what the words say – like 'spill the beans' or 'hit the ground running'.
Modelling (language)	Showing children how to say something by giving them an example first, so they can copy or adapt it.

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Plain-Language Glossary (Easy-to-Understand Explanations)

Narrative skills	The ability to tell a story or explain something in order – beginning, middle, end – with clear meaning.
Predictable routines	Patterns in the day that stay the same, so children feel safe and know what is happening next.
Processing speed	How quickly the brain can take in information, make sense of it, and respond.
Recasting	Repeating back what a child says using clearer or more complete language, while still keeping their meaning.
Scaffolds / Sentence starters	Helpful beginnings or structures that make it easier for children to build a full sentence.
Semantic organisation	How the brain groups words and ideas so we can find them when we need them – like having organised drawers for vocabulary.
Visual supports	Pictures, symbols, diagrams, or written keywords that help make spoken information clearer.
Working memory	The mind's short-term notepad – it holds small bits of information just long enough for us to use them.

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Links and Resources

- Identifying and supporting children and young people with speech, language and communication needs: a rapid evidence review:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68d65f279ce370a7e0a0fd31/Identifying_and_supporting_children_and_young_people_with_speech_language_and_communication_needs_a_rapid_evidence_review.pdf
- Speech and Language UK: Home - Speech and Language UK: Changing young lives
- Communication Supporting Classroom Observation Tool (CSCOT):
<https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/educators-and-professionals/resource-library-for-educators/communication-supporting-classroom-observation-tool-cscot/>
- Better Communication: <https://www.bettercommunication.org.uk/>
- DLD and Me : [DLDandMe](#)
- Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) Mind Your Words free e-learning: [Mind Your Words – mental health e-learning course | RCSLT](#)
- Children and Family Health Devon, Speech, language and communication:
<https://childrenandfamilyhealthdevon.nhs.uk/our-pathways/speech-language-and-communication/>
- [CFHD-Universally-Speaking-screener.pdf](#)

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Links and Resources

- Torbay Support:
<https://www.torbay.gov.uk/children-and-families/home-learning-environment-and-early-years/speech-language-and-communication/>
<https://www.torbay.gov.uk/children-and-families/early-years/professionals/speech-language-and-communication/>
<https://torbayfamilyhub.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Speech-Language-and-Communication-Toolkit-Jan25.pdf>

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