Supporting Students with Speech Language and Communication Needs in the Secondary School

Most classroom teaching at secondary school level, is delivered orally. Teachers talk through new material, give verbal instructions, students ask questions out loud to clarify points or find new information. In addition feedback or revision of previous learning is most often given verbally. If a young person has compromised speech, language or communication they may struggle to understand and learn appropriately within a predominantly oral learning environment.

The good news is that simple adaptations to the curriculum, learning environment and the language used by teachers in the classroom can make a big difference.

Six approaches have been shown to work effectively in reducing the impact of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). Many of these will be familiar to you however the best results will be achieved if all are used consistently across curricular areas. The strategies are:-

1. Modifications to Teacher Talk

2. Use of Visual Support to Accompany Teacher Talk

3. Use of Modified Written Texts

4. Supported Vocabulary Learning Opportunities with Regular Revision

5. Support to Construct Oral and Written Narrative

6. Additional Support for Social Expectations within the Secondary Setting

Modifications to Teacher Talk

Types of 'teacher talk' could include:
- lectures;
- test and activity instructions/ instructions for changing activities;
- verbal feedback and explanations
- reporting; directions and requests;
- story-telling;
- conversation;
- 'performance' (for example, reading prose to the class, telling jokes or role playing).

What helps the young person with speech language and communication needs?

- More and/or longer pauses during instruction, to provide more processing time than usual;
- High redundancy instruction -this means ensuring that specific information/vocabulary/sentence structures/text features are encountered many times, but in different contexts;
- Simplified teacher talk, for example, using simpler sentence structures. That is using language that is shorter, more direct, less implied and is less ambiguous.
- Increased exposure to key concepts by restating often, emphasising key points and repeating frequently;
- Prior activation of the student's topic knowledge (especially vocabulary related to the topic) before introducing new topics or units of work;
- Explicit topic shift cues in teacher talk so the student can easily follow topic changes made by the teacher, for example, the teacher may overtly teach the class that a key phrase such as, 'Okay, something new here,' means that they are to listen and watch for new or different information;
- More frequent and explicit opportunities to repair interaction breakdown, for example, the teacher may:
  - give explicit instructions about what students should say if they lose the thread of classroom talk and need support;
  - build a low-key, 'checking for understanding' routine into classroom talk, so that students become used to monitoring their own comprehension and asking for clarification if they 'get lost' or 'don't get it'.
- Tell students what you want them to do rather than what not to do e.g. say 'Raise your hand' rather than 'Don't shout out!'

Use of Visual Cues to Accompany Teacher Talk

Young people with speech language and communication needs have stronger visual processing skills than auditory skills. They may also have weaker working memory. Using visual cues as an aid to learning can have a dramatic impact.

What helps the young person with Speech Language and Communication Needs?

Use as much visual support and cues as possible during teaching and learning. This allows the young person with SLCN to rely on their stronger visual learning skills. Many visual supports will be routinely used within classrooms- ensure that they complement the oral component of teaching for maximum effect.

Examples of visual supports and cues are:
- PowerPoint – keep image up after you have discussed orally to allow the young person with SLCN to process the information
- Whiteboard notes- note key concepts as discussed and leave for the student to refer to throughout lesson
- Topic headings- use written and visual methods to signal a shift in idea/ concept and to signal key learning points
- Written instructions and examples- young people with SLCNs may need more examples and more opportunity to talk through expectations, processes and sequences.
- Symbols/ pictures /graphics/ photos; provide visual back-up to support verbal instructions to help young people who may struggle to remember spoken language. Lots of text may be daunting so try to support with diagrams, charts and bullet-points.
- The use of timetables/diary management/induction programmes may need support as some children with SLCNs may find organisation of information a challenge.
- Natural gestures may be useful for some young people who need visual support to process verbal language
- Demonstrations/ role play: Maximise opportunities for learning to be reinforced via practical or physical activity. This allows the young person with SLCNs to participate more readily.

Use of Modified Written Texts

Types of written texts that students could be expected to understand are:
- handouts;
- textbooks;
- notes for home;
- timetables;
- newsletters;
- black/whiteboard notes;
- overheads;
- test directions;

What helps the young person with Speech Language and Communication Needs?

Many children with SLCN will find it just as difficult to extract meaning from written text as they would from oral language. Sometimes reading text can be effortful and it may be easier to have some-one else read through out loud first.

Examples of modifications that could help students cope with written language are the use of:
- selective highlighting of key information (or the use of colour coding or font variation to achieve the same result);
- use of symbols and icons to mark important concepts
- paring down the amount of text and support with easier to process visual information such as diagrams or graphic organisers (such as flow charts or mind maps) to demonstrate relationships amongst ideas in a text;
- breaking up text with headings to group related information;
- pre-teaching of new subject vocabulary that may appear in text

Supported Vocabulary Learning and Revision

The complexity of vocabulary used in secondary settings can be a particular challenge for learners with language needs. The pace at which new vocabulary is introduced is similarly challenging.

What helps the young person with Speech Language and Communication Needs?

6 Steps for Effective Vocabulary Instruction (Marzano 2004):
1. Provide a description, explanation, or example of the new word with visual support e.g. picture if possible.
2. Ask students to restate the description, explanation, or example in their own words and monitor and correct misunderstandings.
3. Ask students to construct a picture, symbol, or graphic representing the word e.g. Play "Pictionary", draw an example of the term, dramatise the word using speech bubbles
4. Engage students periodically in activities that help them add to their knowledge of subject vocabulary in their class work e.g. identify synonyms and antonyms for the term, list related words and compare similarities and differences, sort or classify words within topic
5. Periodically ask students to discuss vocabulary with one another e.g. Think-Pair-Share, compare their descriptions of the word, describe their pictures to one another, explain to each other any new information they have learned, identify areas of disagreement or confusion and seek clarification
6. Involve students periodically in activities that allow them to consolidate the word e.g. Pictionary, Jeopardy

Graphic organisers will help the young person with SLCN to learn and remember new vocabulary - Speech Language and Communication Needs - Supporting Vocabulary

Marzano, Robert 2004 Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement Research on What Works in Schools by ASCD,

Support to Construct Oral and Written Narrative

Narrative skills are a key skill in the secondary school setting. Students use narrative to relate a story or series of events with an understood structure, key ideas and clarity of purpose. Narratives can be in either oral or written form.

We use narrative skills in many everyday situations:
- Telling a teacher about an incident at lunchtime
- Retelling a story e.g. the plot from a book, film or TV programme
- Having a conversation in the playground with friends
- Discussing a topic in the classroom
- Talking about the steps involved in a process e.g. science, PE, Home Economics
- Understanding and telling jokes
- Making plans or predictions about future events
- Applying narrative skills to written work (introduction, main idea/event, action, outcome, conclusion)

What helps the young person with Speech Language and Communication Needs?
(adapted from Joffe 2011)

- Set the scene- be explicit about the narrative framework that you are expecting e.g. 'First I want you to tell me about…and then tell me how …lastly tell me…'
- Use of question prompts to elicit key details about story grammar
- Use mind mapping to identify key features in a story prior to writing to discussing
- Activate prior knowledge – real life stories, using sticky notes to record experiences
- Scaffold process of writing for different purposes and different audiences using a story frame
- Explicit teaching of the stages in story writing- (plan, composition, review)
- Provide students with oral narrative framework for different subjects – Science, History, Food Technology, English, Problem solving in Maths until the structure is established
- Use picture cues, headings, maps for cue about what is happening, to predict what might happen next

Joffe, V.L. (2011). Narrative Programme: Using narratives to enhance language and learning across the secondary school curriculum. Milton Keynes, UK: Speechmark Publishers

Additional Support for Social Expectations within the Secondary Setting

Students with speech language and communication needs may struggle to understand and apply the agreed or unwritten social rules that govern everyday interactions in school.

They may struggle to make sense of verbal and nonverbal information and may be more likely to "take things the wrong way".

Taken for granted skills like initiating, taking turns and ending conversations may be a challenge. Even a student with good comprehension but less developed social awareness may understand the words, but not get the meaning as they haven't "read" the context.

Relationships become more nuanced and complex as young people progress through secondary school. Young people with speech language and communication needs may need support to understand some social situations and status relationships.

What helps the young person with Speech Language and Communication Needs?

- A school wide consistent approach to behaviour/ charters/ expectations helps the student with SLCNs to feel that they are part of a school community and being singled out
- Use of visual supports such as gesture, drawings, prompt cards. These can be used to make aspects of the day clearer including the timetable, behaviour expectations, key vocabulary and information for specific classes
- School behaviour 'charters' should written in simple, symbol or visual /photo form so that pupils with speech language and communication needs can understand them.
- Support for less structured times of the day, for example a "pass" for early lunch, designated quiet areas, time out cards and traffic light systems
- Support to stay on topic/ task -do not follow up inappropriate and or tangential responses or questions, but bring the student back to topic
- Avoidance of sarcasm or idiom but if used, explanations should be provided
- Extra time to prepare with support e.g. may need to rehearse and discuss before being given a specific role within a group task
- Predictability is important for many young people with speech language and communication needs- forewarn of changes to planned activities well in advance
- Provide prompts possibly in visual form to clarify expectations of behaviour, managing feelings and social interactions for group activities.