

The Link

SPECIAL
EDITION

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Recovery and Beyond

Supporting your children's
Speech and Language Needs

**THE DOUBLE DISADVANTAGE
OF COVID-19 AND SLCN**

**THE LANGUAGE LINK
SOLUTION**

By Kate Freeman

**CHOOSING THE BEST
SLCN PACKAGE FOR
YOUR SCHOOL**

By Louise Bingham

5 TIPS TO BOOST LITERACY

By Sophie Mustoe-Playfair

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Welcome from the Editor



Welcome to this special issue of The Link during these extraordinary times. As I write, the government is outlining new restrictions and the winter seems to be looming ahead of us all. It is perhaps not surprising that we are all looking back trying to remember the good old days when we could meet without restriction; when it seemed so much easier to support children without social distancing, blended learning and the constant threat of local lockdowns.

Speech Link Multimedia Ltd was founded in 2004 with a simple mission. We wanted to help schools identify and support all their children with speech and language difficulties. During the last 16 years our speech and language therapy team has produced award-winning assessments, interventions and training for over 6,000 primary schools as well as The Link magazine. In all that time schools have been faced with many challenges: shrinking budgets, lack of speech and language therapy support, a regularly revised national curriculum and seemingly ever-changing goalposts for measuring success. Yet the day to day issues are still there. Too many children with speech and language difficulties are being missed or misidentified. Too many children are struggling to develop literacy skills because their poor language is holding them back and too many

children are leaving school without the basic qualifications they need to improve their life chances.

But what has changed is that, for the first time, the government is acknowledging that some children need direct support to catch up. The Coronavirus (COVID-19) catch-up premium funding from the DfE is a great opportunity to look at the support your school is offering for children with speech, language and communication needs.

In this issue, **Kate Freeman, Consultant - Speech and Language in Education**, makes the case for how to use the catch-up premium wisely and discusses why it is so desperately needed. Read her article on pages 3-4.

On pages 5-6 our own **Louise Bingham, Speech and Language Therapist**, explains what you need to think about when choosing a speech and language support package for

your school and outlines the benefits of using the Infant Language Link programme. You can also read about the results you can expect from this approach on page 7.

On the back cover, we have put together straightforward speech and language strategies for supporting **a good foundation of language skills and to boost literacy.**

Last but by no means least, we have a fantastic offer for The Link Magazine Readers.

Buy Language Link before 30th November and get Speech Link free for a year. This includes unlimited access to our speech and language Help Desk and in-package training. T&Cs apply*

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I hope you enjoy this special edition and wish you all a safe and healthy winter.

Best Wishes,

Derry Patterson

*Lead Speech and Language Therapist for
Speech Link Multimedia Ltd*

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Contact our Help Desk at
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**Offer applies to NEW packages only - offer will not apply for resubscriptions of Language Link*

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THE DOUBLE DISADVANTAGE OF COVID-19 AND SLCN

THE LANGUAGE LINK SOLUTION

By Kate Freeman, Consultant –
Speech and Language in Education



What a strange time it has been for everyone! For some there has been the experience of losing loved ones and losing jobs. For others, Covid-19 has seen changes in everyday routines, changes in working patterns, changes in financial situations, children at home, parents at home, fights over who gets to use the computer, toilet roll shortages, empty fridges, exam crises, cancelled holidays, self-isolation and much, much more. It has certainly been a crisis without precedence and without the warning that could have made better planning possible.

What toll has all this taken on children in schools and especially those children with identified or unidentified speech, language and communication needs (SLCN)?

There have been reports on the widening gap between children whose schools and parents have had the time, knowledge, capacity and personal resources to support learning at home and those who haven't; between children whose needs are able to be supported from a distance and those who require more specialist, direct, face to face interventions; and between families of keyworkers or those families who are able to prioritise education and those who aren't. Recent figures from an online survey of 4,000 parents in England by the Institute of Fiscal Studies carried out between April and May shows that children from better-off households spent 30% more time each day on educational activities than children from the poorest fifth of households.¹

According to the same report, the education sector is the one most likely to have been hit hard by the coronavirus crisis. Schools are understandably concerned about how they can continue the work that they had previously been doing to narrow the gap between their more and less advantaged pupils and those without and with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

The groups of children with SLCN (between two and eight in every primary class of 30²) have been doubly disadvantaged. Oracy and the skills involved in understanding and using spoken communication are fundamental to learning, friendships, self-esteem and future outcomes³. These skills have been less practised, less supported and less linked to education since the early closing of schools in March 2020. The help that may be usually available to these children (including speech and language therapy assessments and support) has also been severely restricted during the pandemic.

Many speech and language therapists were called upon to help as Covid-19 support workers in hospitals and many others were not able to provide the face to face support that usually takes place⁴. However, the children's needs are still there. They still need to develop skills to understand their lessons (which are often presented verbally), to contribute their ideas (in spoken or written form) and to play an active role in the community of the school through relationships with their peers and teachers. There is also the possibility that the previously strong skills of pupils able to concentrate and take in information in the classroom have been significantly disrupted.

The return to school has provided an opportunity to regroup, to re-establish classroom rules (albeit in a very different environment),

THE EDUCATION ENDOWMENT FOUNDATION IDENTIFIES THE BENEFIT OF USING THE FUNDS FOR PROGRAMMES THAT IMPACT ON ORAL LANGUAGE SKILLS

to reconnect with pupils and their families and to identify children with specific needs and monitor the progress of those previously identified. This is no mean feat!

One of the lessons learnt through Covid-19 is the benefit that technology plays in providing much needed support. Neil Bates, (Chair of the Edge Foundation) states, "The impact of this crisis on schools has brought into sharp focus the importance of access to digital technology and connectivity to support all young people's learning... The coronavirus outbreak has highlighted the vital importance of technology for learning. When schools re-open, children will continue to need digital resources for independent research, homework, and projects, to learn the skills they need for the workplace." His words are echoed by Geoff Barton: "First of all, the need to turn round remote learning for millions of children in an incredibly short space of time will have given many teachers a great deal of additional experience in the use of technology to deliver education... Now, the entire education community has undergone a crash course in the use of an array of platforms. We will have learned more about the possibilities, the pitfalls, and also the constraints... but this

crisis could, and should, be the springboard to take the use of technology to the next level, as part of what we do all the time".

It makes sense, therefore, to look at the opportunities provided by digital technology to plug some of the gaps exaggerated (or perhaps created) by the missing months of schooling and specialist support. Infant Language Link offers just this type of intervention. Schools are able to identify children's specific language and communication needs using digital technology. Once the area of need is clear, an individual programme is created digitally for use by the pupil supported by a teaching assistant, teacher or SENCo. Training programmes and group interventions are also included in the packages. Speech Link Multimedia Ltd has a wide range of evidence that shows the progress that can be made by pupils using one of the interventions at infant, junior and secondary school levels.

We are pleased that in England, the DfE is providing a Covid-19 catch-up premium specifically aimed at enabling schools to plug the gaps identified above. In their support guide for schools on the use of this funding, the Education Endowment Foundation identifies the benefit of using the funds for programmes that impact on oral language skills. At the time of writing, we are still waiting to hear what the devolved governments in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland will be providing to enable schools in these countries to support catch up with their pupils. We do know that prior to Covid-19, many schools used pupil premium funding to access this type of support. We very much look forward to talking to you about how best we can help students in your school to overcome the double disadvantage of Covid-19 and SLCN.

1) The Edge Foundation (2020) *The Impact of Covid-19 on Education A summary of evidence on the early impacts of lockdown*

2) I CAN and RCSLT (2018) *Bercow: Ten Years On An independent review of provision for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs in England*

3) Bercow: Ten Years On

4) RCSLT (2020) *Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the speech and language therapy profession*



Choosing the best SLCN package for your school

By Louise Bingham, Speech and Language Therapist



The long-term impact of untreated SLCN on academic attainment and lifelong prospects is well established and huge numbers of children in the UK struggle to acquire oral language. Up to 50% of children in areas of social disadvantage start school with below average language skills, that are not adequate to support their next steps in learning. This has led to a significant attainment gap in our schools, which is likely only to have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

This means that it is now more crucial than ever that schools have the skills to identify and support children with SLCN, making SLCN intervention an obvious choice for catch-up funding to boost

pupils' attainment this year. We have written this guide to help you choose the best SLCN package for your school.

Does the package identify which children have SLCN?

Language difficulties are known as a 'hidden need' because it is impossible to identify from observation alone that a child is having difficulty understanding. This has resulted in lots of children with SLCN not being identified and falling through the gaps. It is crucial that an intervention for SLCN contains an assessment to enable you to identify which children need support. The best assessments identify which children would benefit from targeted intervention in school and which need more specialist support in order to make progress, to enable schools to target resources more efficiently.

Infant Language Link provides a standardised assessment which, used universally in Year R/P1, identifies all children having difficulty understanding language and means that no children are left behind. The assessment identifies which children need targeted support in school and which children may need more specialist support, such as from speech and language therapy, allowing you to target precious school resources in the right places.

Does the package build SLCN knowledge and expertise throughout the school?

Many intervention packages are designed to train one person to deliver them, however this is not the most efficient way of supporting children with SLCN. These children

are going to make the most progress within a communication friendly environment, where quality first teaching strategies are in place within the classroom. It is crucial that all staff have the knowledge and skills to support children with SLCN, so it is important to look at what an intervention package can provide for the whole school. Many children can be supported through the use of classroom strategies alone, without the need for more targeted intervention.

Infant Language Link is designed as a whole school package to build the SLCN knowledge and expertise of all staff. In-package training develops understanding of SLCN and the package includes a bank of strategies and resources that are easy for teaching staff to implement in the classroom. Universal support for children is emphasised as the first port of call for all children, with those that need further support then able to receive more targeted intervention. This ensures that pupils are supported to access learning in the classroom as much as possible.

Is there evidence that the package works and is it feasible to deliver in school?

It is important to review the evidence base for the intervention package, to ensure that you are buying something that is going to work. When reading research studies, it is important to note how much intervention was provided in the study and how much progress was made as a result. For example, if within the study children received daily intervention, this would be very difficult to achieve within a school timetable and, therefore, you would be unlikely to see as much progress.

A study completed in 2018-19 demonstrated that Infant Language Link is highly effective in boosting children's language skills (see page 7 for details). The study found that children receiving Infant Language Link interventions made on average 5 months' progress (in addition to expected progress due to maturation) with only 2 months' progress made by control children. This progress was made through children receiving two 8-week language groups, where a 30 minutes session was completed weekly. The package outlines the best way to use the interventions to ensure that children make the most progress.

Does the package target specific areas of language for children, or is it a one-size fits all?

Language difficulties are very complex and affect different areas for different children. This means that no child with SLCN is the same as another. It is important that the intervention you choose allows you to target different areas of language depending on the difficulties each child has, making the most efficient use of time and resources. In addition, not all children require 1:1 intervention and many can be supported successfully in a group.

The Infant Language Link assessment identifies which specific areas of language children are having difficulty with and recommends specific language programmes based on this. This ensures that the intervention provided is directly targeting their needs. Session plans, resources and tracking sheets for measuring progress are included for all groups and more intensive 1:1 intervention is only recommended for those children that need it.

What happens after you have purchased the package?

Research shows that school staff can make a huge difference to children's language skills with the right support in place, however as language skills are very complex, school staff will continue to need advice in providing the best support for these children. Find out whether your school will receive any ongoing support after purchasing an intervention. It is also important to find out whether updates will be made to the intervention, as if it is something that is provided in the form of a manual with photocopiable resources, this is likely to go out of date within a few years due to advances in research.

Infant Language Link is an online package with training, resources and support all built in. The colourful resources needed to carry out all of the intervention sessions are printed from the website, with no additional costs involved. Our Help Desk of friendly ex-school staff provide unlimited support by phone or email and, for more specific advice, staff can speak to our SaLT team. The website is updated as needed by our team of speech and language therapists to reflect changes in research practice and in response to school staff feedback.

A year's subscription for Infant Language Link can be purchased for the equivalent of the catch-up funding provided for just 6 children. As a package that supports the whole school, this represents excellent value for money. Buy Language Link before 30th November and get Speech Link free for a year. This includes UNLIMITED access to our speech and language Help Desk and in-package training. T&Cs apply* Get a free 2 week trial at www.speechandlanguage.info/trial

THE IMPACT OF LANGUAGE LINK ON ATTAINMENT

By Louise Bingham, Speech and Language Therapist

To assess the impact of Infant Language Link on pupil attainment, we compared the progress of Reception children from schools using our package for two terms, with those from control schools providing typical in-school SLCN support. All 71 children were assessed at the beginning and end of the academic year on a range of recognised speech and language assessments.

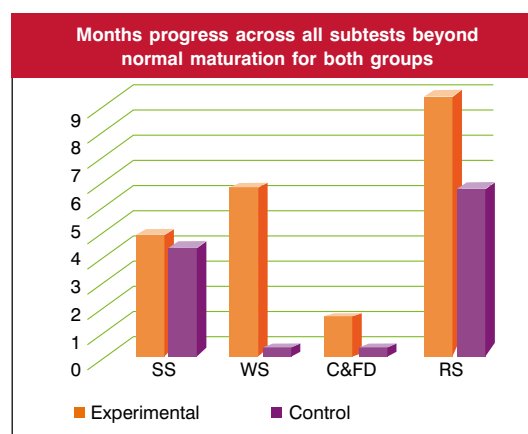
Did the Language Link interventions make a difference to the children's language skills?

The results of the study were overwhelmingly positive. There were highly significant differences in performance with the experimental group making more progress compared to the control group.

Across the standardised assessment measures, the children in the experimental group made an average of 5 months' progress above expected progress due to maturation, compared to an average of only 2 months' progress for the control children.

Chart Key: **SS** sentence structure **WS** word structure
C&FD concepts and following direction **RS** - recalling sentences

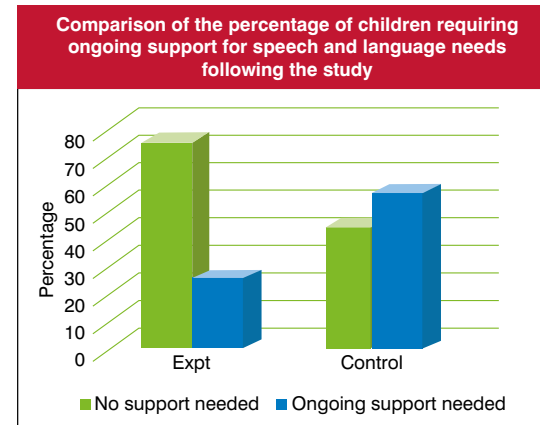
Subtests form the CELF Preschool 2UK: Wiig, E., Secord, W. and Semel, E. Harcourt Assessment.



Would children following Language Link be less likely to need ongoing support?

There was also a significant difference between the groups as to whether ongoing support was required for the children. 75% of the children in the experimental group no longer needed further language intervention at the end of the study compared to 44% of the control group.

The language intervention took place over just two terms with most children attending between 12 and 20 weekly half hour sessions delivered by TAs as well as classroom support through whole class teaching strategies.



Did the children in the experimental group maintain these gains?

We followed up a small number of children from the experimental group 14 months from the end of the study. All of these children had received little or no intervention in this time.

The results show that gains in language performance have been maintained.

Infant Language Link is used by schools across the country in the same way that it was used in our impact study, so these are the results that you can expect from using the package in your school.

	Ongoing support needed at end of study	No support needed at end of study	Ongoing support needed 14 months following study	No support needed 14 months following study
Experimental Children (n=16)	4	12	3	13

5 TIPS to Boost Literacy

By Sophie Mustoe-Playfair, SaLT

Early speech and language skills are the most significant predictor of a child's later literacy skills. Our spoken language skills are fundamental underpinnings of literacy because reading and writing are another medium for language. Developing confident readers and writers goes beyond phonics – we can boost literacy by building a good foundation of language skills. Here's how:



Phonological Awareness

Children need to develop good phonological awareness skills to be able to identify and manipulate the sounds in words before they can write and recognise them. This skill is much broader than phonics, which refers to mapping sounds to letters, and includes segmenting sounds, blending sounds together, and recognising rhymes and syllable breaks.

OUR TIP Make time to pause when you're reading a book (or just looking at the pictures) so you can talk about the sounds in the words. Think about rhyme, syllable clapping or tapping, and listening to the first sound in words. Find groups of words which share one feature in common.



Vocabulary

Books can help to develop a child's vocabulary outside of their everyday experiences, and as their vocabulary expands, they will become more and more able to work out the meaning of new words from context. Children with a limited vocabulary will find it difficult to make sense of texts and may struggle to engage in reading and writing activities.

OUR TIP Make sure you explain any new vocabulary or concepts that you encounter. Remember – children need multiple exposures to new words to learn them securely. Props and actions can help to demonstrate meaning. Be sure to revisit new words and use them again in everyday contexts.

Inferencing

Reading requires more than simply decoding words. Children also need to understand what they have read. Children may need support to make links between events and to identify the intentions and motivations of characters. Without the extra information that is gleaned when we 'read between the lines', children won't be able to understand the story and apply what they have learnt from a text in another context.

OUR TIP When you're reading with a child, pause to discuss what's happening. Point out cause and effect situations and identify the emotions and motivations of characters to help children make links. See who can predict what might happen next.

Figurative Language

Good writing, whether it's a story or a new report, uses figurative language to draw readers in and capture their imagination. Engaging features such as word-play, metaphors and idioms require an understanding of figurative or non-literal language and words with multiple meanings, or else they can quickly become very confusing.

OUR TIP Make these unusual features of language explicit and take time to clearly explain the true meaning of figurative language. Encourage children to identify when they haven't understood something, and check understanding by asking them to show or explain.

Language Structure

As well as recognising the words that make up a text, we need to understand and be able to use grammar and syntax effectively in order to make sense of what we are reading, and to write our ideas clearly and logically. Children will need to be able to understand and use grammatical features in spoken language before they are able to apply these skills to written language.

OUR TIP Remember that you don't have to read the words on the page. You can add in opportunities to use specific grammar. Use lots of opportunities to model target grammatical structures in spoken language and practise these with children.