Department for Education

Speech, language and communication

Evidence summary

Post-16 settings

Developed in partnership with Ambition Institute

Document explainer

Purpose: This evidence summary is designed to provide an overview of what FE teachers and support staff need to know about speech, language and communication (SLC) development and needs. It outlines inclusive teaching strategies that staff can use to support all learners, especially those with SLC difficulties.

Audience: Staff in post-16 settings.

How to use this document:

- This evidence summary has been designed to follow on from the 'Introduction to speech, language and communication' session.
- The document can be used in full or in parts. This will depend on the context of your setting and the structure of your planned professional development time.
- Engaging with the introductory session prior to reading this document is advised but not essential.
- As you read, it may be useful to make note of your responses to the reflection questions.
- Many of the teaching practices and strategies described will already be familiar. The purpose of the document is not to introduce entirely new strategies but to aid understanding of how familiar practices can support speech, language and communication development.
- This evidence summary can be used flexibly. For example, as a self-study tool for individual reflection or as a shared reading activity in small groups.
- There are further opportunities to explore the themes in this evidence summary in the 'Speech, language and communication sense-making session'.

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What do FE teachers need to know about SLC development?

What do we mean by speech, language and communication?

- Speech is our physical ability to make verbal sounds and words; speech difficulties involve problems with perceiving, producing or representing speech, or issues with voice quality. **Language** includes both verbal and non-verbal communication, with receptive and expressive language key to understanding how learners process language. **Communication** is the social use of language, including using and interpreting language appropriately in conversations; difficulties here relate to challenges with this social aspect.
- How learners communicate their ideas with others is known as **expressive language.**
- How learners process and make meaning from language is known as **receptive language.**
- Expressive and receptive language capabilities can differ within the same learner.
- Speech, language and communication needs is an umbrella term encompassing a broad range of needs that affect a learner's ability to communicate effectively.

How might speech, language and communication (SLC) impact learning?

- Speech, language, and communication are foundational to learning and development (Department for education, 2023). These skills act as a gateway to learners' wider development, including their ability to access course content including specialist or vocational curriulae, and to prepare for employment and adulthood.
- Without support, learners who experience SLC challenges are at greater risk of literacy difficulties and academic underachievement (Bishop & Snowling, 2004; Conti-Ramsden, 2008; Dockrell, et al., 2011; Snow et al., 1998).

- When learners understand the language used in lessons they are better able to follow explanations, respond to questions, participate in lessons (including routines and instructions) and make sense of new concepts.
- When learners can express themselves, they are better able to build on their understanding, rehearse ideas, ask for help and demonstrate what they know.
- Language develops through repeated, purposeful practice (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021). Opportunities to listen, speak, discuss, explain, question and use new vocabulary can influence the speed and depth of learners' language development.
- SLC development may look different at each stage of education. Understanding this progression helps FE teachers recognise when learners may need additional support and adapt teaching accordingly (Dockrell et al., 2012).

What factors should FE teachers consider when supporting speech, language and communication development?

Scenario

A FE teacher notices that in a workshop one of her learners often asks a peer who sits next to them to repeat instructions. They do this quietly, as if they do not want to draw attention to their uncertainty.

Reflection:

Think of a learner you teach or recently taught who exhibited a pattern of behaviours similar to the learner in the scenario.

- How did you respond?
- How might a better understanding of this learner's needs have helped you support them?
- How might the SLC barriers they face be impacting their learning and experience of education?

What barriers to learning might learners face?

Learning environments are communication-rich environments, and everyday teaching routines can place significant cognitive and social demands on learners' SLC skills. This is especially true when we…

- ask questions
- give multi-step instructions for activites, routines or safety
- introduce new concepts and ideas at pace without explicit instruction or modelling
- learn/infer new information from context only (spoken or written language)

Effective practice in these areas is central to inclusive teaching. To learn successfully, learners need to understand behavioural expectations and curriculum/course content as well as engaging with assessment activities. For learners with SLC needs, these moments may create barriers to participation and understanding. For example:

- Learners may find it difficult to follow lessons when they are required to process a lot of spoken information at once. This can affect their receptive language, making it harder for them to understand explanations, questions or instructions as they are given.
- Some learners may struggle to hold spoken information in mind long enough to act on it. Even when they understand individual words or phrases, demands on working memory can make it difficult to remember the full instruction, follow a sequence of steps, or connect new information to what has already been taught.

Recognising these barriers helps FE teachers adapt communication so that learners can access routines and learning, while also benefiting from high-quality language and purposeful opportunities to practise.

What might it look like if learners are experiencing challenges with their speech, language, and communication?

It can be difficult to know when learners' SLC skills might be presenting a barrier to accessing learning. It may be that you notice patterns in a learner's behaviour and responses that give you an indication that they are struggling to understand questions, explanations or instructions. For example:

- During whole-group discussion, a learner finds it difficult to keep track of what has been said and what they are expected to do next. Different learners may respond in a range of ways when they struggle to keep track of the lesson. For example,

some may appear withdrawn, while others might show frustration or call out for clarification. These behaviours can interrupt the pace of the lesson and affect the learners' concentration, as well as that of their peers.

- Learners may struggle to remember the sequence of steps in familiar routines, such as preparing for independent work, transitioning between activities, or knowing what to do when they finish a task.
- A learner may show strong understanding when working with shapes, patterns, or visual representations, but find it harder to follow the language and steps involved in written or verbal problems.
- When learners are finding it hard to process spoken language, they may lose focus, copy others without understanding or become unsettled. This can be mistaken for not listening.
- Learners may sometimes react very strongly to behaviour corrections or minor misunderstandings of instructions. This emotional response can stem from frustration that has built up over time, especially if they have repeatedly struggled to understand or follow instructions.

Reflection:

1. Are any of these scenarios familiar in your setting?
2. How have you supported these learners or those with similar challenges in your setting?

What are the nuances and caveats when thinking about identifying and supporting SLC difficulties?

It can be challenging for FE teachers to understand whether a learner's behaviour is linked to a SLC need, another underlying need, or whether it is primarily a behaviour concern. There is strong evidence of an association between SLC needs and behavioural challenges. For example, 81% of children with emotional and behavioural disorders have significant language difficulties, often unidentified (Hollo et. al., 2014). Some studies have found that between 40% and 54% of children with spoken language difficulties also have behaviour challenges (van Daal et al., 2007; Maggio et al., 2014). However, these findings are based on small sample sizes, so the actual proportion may vary.

While not all behavioural concerns are related to SLC needs, it is worth being curious about whether SLC difficulties might be contributing, especially when

behaviour is unexpected or persistent. Exploring this possibility can help FE teachers identify patterns, assess learners' needs and consider whether further support or specialist input may be helpful. It can sometimes be challenging to ascertain the reason for a learner's behaviour or actions, and FE teachers should be cautious about assuming that a learner is deliberately choosing not to listen, follow instructions, or engage with learning. Inclusive teaching practices can help create the conditions in which FE teachers are better able to interpret what may be contributing to a learner's behaviour. For example, inclusive teaching practices such as carefully sequenced learning, routines are clearly taught and consistently upheld, and instructions are concise, it becomes easier for learners to meet expectations. This can consequently give FE teachers a better insight into why learners might respond to different stimuli in a particular way. Similarly, when assessment is used regularly to check understanding and respond to misconceptions or gaps in knowledge, FE teachers may have a clearer picture of whether learners have understood and can access learning.

High-quality teaching practices like these do not remove the need for professional judgement, wider information, or specialist support where appropriate. However, these high-quality teaching practices help to make learning more accessible for all learners. By reducing ambiguity about what is expected in a given setting and clarifying curriculum content, these universal approaches can provide learners with the support they need to succeed. This clarity benefits FE teachers as well. When expectations and content are made explicit, it becomes easier to identify when a learner is struggling for reasons beyond routines or instructions. As a result, FE teachers are better placed to make informed, responsive decisions about when to seek further information or specialist support. While these practices are valuable, they do not replace the need for professional judgement or additional support where it is needed.

Reflection:

1. What is your main takeaway from this section?
2. What is one insight that you will investigate further?

How can inclusive teaching support learners' SLC development?

Some of the content in this section is drawn from primary research conducted in schools, but is included here where there is good confidence it also applies to post-16 settings.

Why start with inclusive teaching?

High-quality, evidence-informed teaching is the most effective way to support all learners, particularly those with additional needs and those from disadvantaged backgrounds (EEF, 2026). Strengthening universal teaching practices benefits all learners and is especially important for learners who face barriers to learning.

Inclusive teaching recognises the importance of strengthening and sustaining universal approaches (such as scaffolding) while also considering where it's appropriate to make effective adaptations for some pupils.

Universal approaches are already an important tool to support all pupils to understand our questions, instructions and explanations and reduce the pressure that these moments may put on our pupils' receptive language processing.

Importantly, many of these strategies will already be familiar to FE teachers as part of effective teaching practice. The value of considering them through a speech, language and communication lens is not necessarily that they are new, but that it can deepen understanding of when, why and for which learners they may be particularly important. This can help FE teachers make more deliberate decisions about adapting and combining strategies to support learners' access to learning and long-term language development.

Inclusive teaching practices are needed because speech, language and communication shape learners' access to learning and future employment. FE teachers might consider the different ways that these practices can be used in order to make decisions about which ones are most likely to be effective in a given circumstance:

1. **Reduce barriers:** some teaching practices and strategies reduce immediate barriers, for example by providing visual supports such as diagrams or picture cues. These help learners access learning when speech, language, and communication difficulties might otherwise make it challenging to understand the content.

2. **Long-term development:** some teaching practices and strategies can be used to deliberately develop learners' speech, language, and communication over time (Antalek et al., 2025).

These two purposes are equally important, but FE teachers may need to prioritise one over the other depending on the learner, the task, and the demands of the moment.

Which inclusive teaching practices support all learners, especially those with SLC difficulties?

When taking a universal approach to inclusive teaching, there are several inclusive teaching practices that are enacted through a range of strategies. For example, there are several teaching practices that are particularly effective in supporting learners' SLC development:

- model and scaffold high-quality conversations: feedback, explanations and questioning
- use visual cues
- develop speech and language across the curriculum
- create opportunities for oracy development

(Gilbride & Jackson, 2026).

Each practice can be implemented using a variety of teaching strategies depending on the age of learners, the curriculum content and the specific challenge being addressed. These strategies can help learners access learning content, such as curriculum and technical subject knowledge and instructions, while also developing SLC over time. Individual strategies are often not enough to address barriers to learning for learners with SLC difficulties. It is important to combine different approaches and adapt them to the needs of each learner and situation to provide effective support.

Model and scaffold high-quality conversations: feedback, explanations and questioning

Adjusting language to match learners' receptive language skills makes it more likely that learners will understand (Gilbride & Jackson, 2026). This inclusive teaching practice can be implemented through a range of strategies, including:

- using clear and unambiguous language
- balancing simple and developmental language
- considering sentence structure
- moving from simple to complex and concrete to abstract

These strategies can be particularly effective for learners with SLC difficulties because greater linguistic complexity can make it harder for learners to process language (Nation et al., 1999; Bishop & Snowling, 2004). Using

appropriately pitched language helps learners understand key information and access the curriculum without lowering expectations for the vocabulary and sentence structures they encounter.

Feedback is a universal approach that can support all learners, and it can be particularly important for learners with speech, language and communication (SLC) difficulties. Effective feedback helps learners understand the gap between their current performance and the intended learning goal, and it gives them clear, manageable next steps for improvement. For all learners, including those with SLC difficulties, feedback is most useful when it is specific, concise, timely and delivered using language that learners can process and act on (Collin & Quigley, 2021). Strategies that can support high-quality feedback include:

- making success criteria explicit so learners know what they are aiming for
- identifying whether the issue is an error that needs teaching or modelling, or a mistake that can be corrected with a brief prompt
- giving one or two focused next steps, rather than lengthy written comments
- using whole-group feedback, modelling and examples to address common misconceptions
- providing time in lessons and workshops for learners to process, practise and respond to feedback
- checking understanding by asking learners to explain the feedback or next step in their own words

Example:

An engineering tutor wants her learners to analyse the resistance in electrical circuits. She is aware that this group all have differing levels of prior scientific knowledge. She starts by sharing two real life examples of electrical circuits where resistance is used in the design of the product: a toaster and a kettle. She explains the role of resistance in each, emphasising the key terminology, and writing a simple definition of each key term on the board. Learners then work in groups to build electrical circuits, experimenting with different resistors to deepen their understanding. This gives them an opportunity to use key terms related to resistance such as voltage, charge and current in an appropriate context.

In this example the FE teacher used the following strategy:

Move from concrete to abstract by first offering examples of everyday products that learners will be familiar with (e.g. toaster) and then explicitly linking these simple examples to more complex and abstract ones (electrical circuits with different resistors).

Reflection:

1. What is the teacher doing well in this example?
2. Can you think of an example of where you have done this effectively in your own practice?

Use visual cues

A visual cue is an aid that helps people understand verbal information by providing something they can see, such as pictures, symbols, gestures or objects (Gilbride & Jackson, 2026). This inclusive teaching practice can be implemented through a range of strategies, including:

- using visuals to scaffold learning
- offering reminders using visual timetables
- using non-verbal cues to reinforce speech
- using transcription tools when using digital delivery of content

Working memory is essential for thinking and learning, as it allows us to temporarily hold and actively process information (Miyake & Shah, 1999; Baddeley, 2003). However, its capacity is limited and can be affected by factors such as task complexity and the language demands of a lesson (Atkinson & Shriffin, 1968; Baddeley, 1992; Miller et al., 2017; Weinstein, 2017). For learners with SLC needs, these limits can make it particularly challenging to process and retain information. Some instances where the demand of tasks increase cognitive load and therefore learners might find retaining and processing information include:

- complex tasks
- language-heavy tasks
- multi-step technical processes

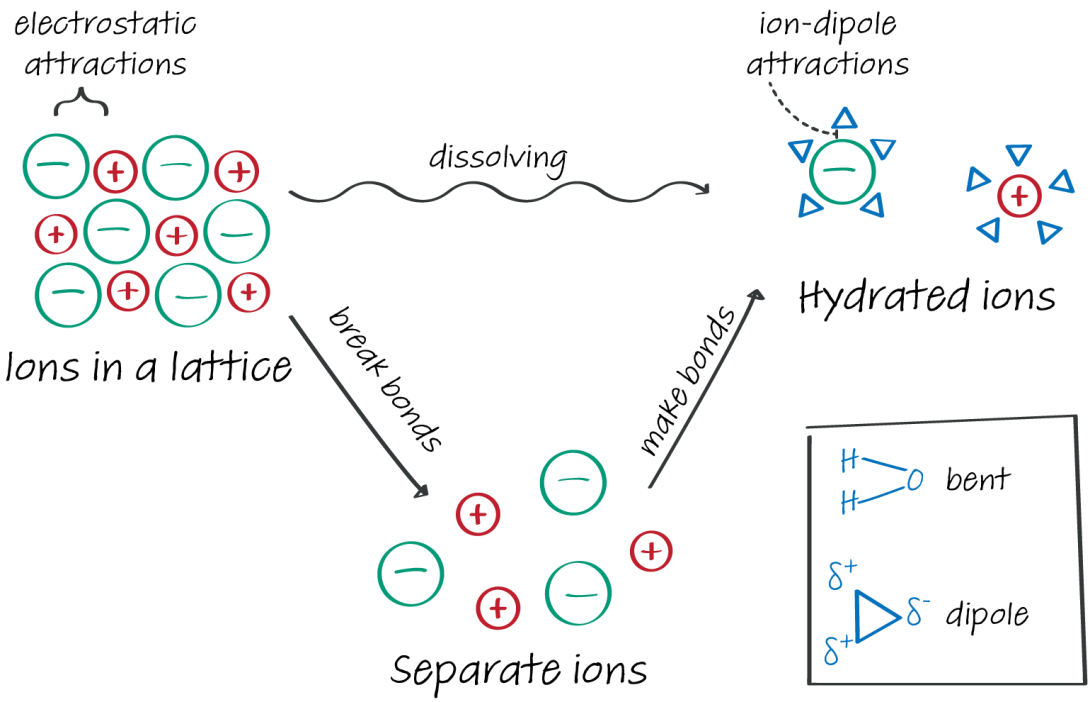
Research suggests that working memory has partially independent systems for processing auditory/verbal and visual information. Therefore, presenting verbal explanations alongside relevant visual information may support learning by distributing information across auditory and visual modes (Low & Sweller, 2005), potentially making more efficient use of limited working-memory resources (Liu et al., 2019; Harskamp et al., 2007). Visual cues can help learners understand speech and language (Goldin-Meadow, 1999; Zhang et al., 2021; Evans et al., 2001) by improving access to language and learning, and contributing to language development (Bochner & Jones, 2003).

In order to be effective, visual aids should be age appropriate and carefully matched to learners' developmental stage and be appropriate for the curriculum content and purpose that they are being used for. Equally, visual aids can be less effective if they are unnecessarily complex for the content they are being used to support or are poorly matched to the activity or explanation that they are paired with. Therefore, visual cues should be carefully selected to complement and clarify the verbal information being presented. For example, an FE teacher explaining when and why safety equipment must be used might show only blue safety symbols as they indicate mandatory equipment. Mixing these with red safety symbols, which signal prohibitions, could confuse learners and make it harder for them to distinguish between what is required and what is not allowed at this point in their learning. Visual aids should be directly relevant and instructive, helping to explain or illustrate the concept or process, rather than simply being generic or loosely related.

It is important to recognise that visuals are not simply about making learning 'easier'. Some diagrams and images can present significant challenges, depending on their complexity and the concepts they illustrate. FE teachers need to think carefully about the purpose of each visual aid, considering whether it will support understanding or introduce new demands. Thoughtful selection helps ensure that visuals are both accessible and effective for all learners.

Example:

A chemistry (A level) FE teacher explains the energy changes that occur when a substance dissolves. As she explains, she draws simplified drawings to show what happens to the substance at each stage of this process. She labels the diagrams with key vocabulary, using different colours and shapes to make abstract ideas easier to observe. When she finishes her explanation, she questions learners to check their understanding and uses the visuals as a scaffold if learners need a reminder of the key knowledge.



In this example the FE teacher used the following strategies:

- A simple drawing to scaffold learning.
- Annotating a simple drawing to reinforce speech.

Reflection:

1. What is the teacher doing well in this example?
2. Can you think of an example of where you have done this effectively in your own practice?

Develop speech and language across the curriculum

A well-planned curriculum supports language development by providing opportunities for learners to develop their SLC in a range of ways including:

- learning and practising vocabulary (McGregor et al., 2021; Lowe et al., 2018; Elleman et al., 2019)
- working with complex subject-specific words (Owen Van Horne, 2023; Riccomini et al., 2015).
- analysing language, inferring meaning and developing narratives (Meaux & Norris, 2018; Owen Van Horne et al., 2024; Balthazar & Scott, 2024)
- expanding vocabulary and sentence structures through literature (Nation et al., 2022; Wasik et al., 2016; Dobinson & Dockrell, 2021)

This is because explicit teaching and modelling help learners build the language skills needed for learning across the curriculum, particularly given that written language exposes learners to more complex sentences and vocabulary than spoken language (Nation et al., 2022; Montgomery et al., 2023; Gilbride & Jackson, 2026). This inclusive teaching practice can be implemented through a range of strategies which depend on curriculum planning over time, including:

- pre-teach specialist vocabulary and give opportunities to practise using it
- check understanding and model strategies for resolving misunderstandings/uncertainties
- develop reading to learn
- build language acquisition by extending what learners say and repeating key concepts

Example:

A health practitioner leads her learners through a role play scenario of a conversation with a mock patient who has mobility needs. The purpose of the role-play is to model the use of person-centred care language. The practitioner recaps key vocabulary (such as compassion, respect and dignity). For each term, she shares an example of a sentence that demonstrates it in action. She then carries out the role play exercise. Afterwards, she questions her learners on how she has demonstrated person-centred care. She asks them to select specific phrases or sentences and to discuss their effect.

In this example the FE teacher used the following strategies:

- Focus on expressive language to convey particular values.
- Consider receptive language by offering multiple examples and contextualisation.

Reflection:

1. What is the teacher doing well in this example?
2. Can you think of an example of where you have done this effectively in your own practice?

Create opportunities for oracy development

Structured talk gives learners repeated chances to practise expressive and receptive language, supporting both subject learning and meaningful speech development (Gilbride & Jackson, 2026). Examples of strategies that help create opportunities for oracy development include:

- scaffolding questions and responses
- promoting meaningful talk for a range of purposes
- focusing on expressive language and specialist terminology
- modeling strategies for checking understanding and asking for clarification

Engaging in language-rich activities strengthens these skills (Bercow, 2008). Frequent, purposeful talk builds the language skills learners need for learning and social interaction. When learners communicate clearly, take turns and listen actively, they learn to share ideas and respond thoughtfully (Weisleder & Fernald, 2013; Hoff, 2006; Perry et al., 2018). Asking questions to clarify meaning also deepens understanding (Mercer, 2008; Howe & Abedin, 2013).

Example:

Learners on a Creative Media Production and Technology (L3) course have been working on a pitch that promotes a podcast to a panel of industry experts. They are doing some peer critique of their pitches. The tutor has asked them to focus on how creative choices demonstrate understanding of their audience. Before they start, the tutor verbally provides an example of a good critique, a transcript of this critique is also shown on the board. He breaks it down, specifying what makes it effective and pinpointing where and how audience is referenced. He then lists these points on the board as success criteria, so students can refer to them. Learners then work in pairs to verbally share their pitches. They take turns and critique each other's work. This gives them an opportunity to listen carefully to each other and share structured feedback.

In this example the FE teacher used the following strategies:

- scaffolding learners' critiques by providing a broken-down example and a set of success criteria
- promoting meaningful talk for a range of purposes within one learning episode as learners are sharing their own pitches as well as listening carefully and giving each other feedback

Reflection:

1. What is the teacher doing well in this example?
2. Can you think of an example of where you have done this effectively in your own practice?

How can FE teachers use these strategies to support learners' learning and SLC development?

- **Start by reducing barriers to learning.** FE teachers can use visual cues, concise explanations, clear instructions and carefully constructed questions to reduce the pressure on learners' receptive language. This helps learners to access learning in the moment and makes it easier for FE teachers to identify when further support may be needed.
- **Model and scaffold the language learners need to use.** Learners benefit when FE teachers explicitly model vocabulary, sentence structures and talk routines before expecting them to use these independently. Scaffolds such as examples, sentence stems and success criteria can support learners to organise their thinking and express ideas with increasing precision.
- **Plan for language development across subjects.** SLC development should not be separated from curriculum content. FE teachers can deliberately teach subject-specific vocabulary, revisit key words and structures over time, and create opportunities for learners to practise language in meaningful curriculum contexts.
- **Balance supporting access to learning with long-term development.** Inclusive practices support learners most effectively when they both help learners learn now and develop SLC skills they will need in future. FE teachers may need to adapt the level of support depending on the task, the learner and the demands of the moment, while maintaining high expectations for all learners.

Reflection:

1. What challenges do you face when supporting learners' SLC development?
2. Which of the strategies described are already embedded in your practice? How has reading about them through an SLC lens changed your thinking about when, why or how you use them?
3. How do you maintain high expectations and provide appropriate challenge, while also meeting the needs of learners who require additional support?

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Below is a full list of references drawn upon during the creation of this evidence summary, which includes research across a range of phases and age ranges.

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