



The Teaching Element

Learner Variability and Removing Barriers

We now know, that like fingerprints, no two brains are the same. There is no single way in which the brain reacts to a task or activity. Removing barriers in the learning environment can be done by:

- Anticipating variability of learners
- Providing flexible ways for students to reach learning goals
- Providing multiple means of engagement, representation and action/expression (please see [UDL Principle](#))

By doing this, we can expand a student's capacity to regulate and engage in their learning more successfully.

When reducing stressors to increase engagement and participation, it is important to remove barriers rather than solely reducing demands.

Removing barriers in the learning environment while beneficial for all, will be essential for some. This ensures that all learners have the agency required to be successful. The goal is to create a learning environment where our students are purposeful and motivated, resourceful and knowledgeable, and strategic and goal-directed.

Practical Strategies

It is important to talk to students and take into account what they tell us. Remember, they know what is and is not working in their environment. Start with what they tell you.

The following is not an exhaustive list and is dependent on the individuals at the heart of planning, however, some relevant strategies to support all students include:

Provide Multiple Means of Engagement

- Be clear in expectations and rules, while remaining flexible to respond to student variability and regulation
- Collaborate with students to co-design tasks, activities and the learning environment
- Visually represent expectations and rules
- Model skills
- Use schedules, checklists, cues and signals
- Use social narratives to prepare students
- Create routines that foster predictability and consistency
- Vary the social demands involved in class tasks and activities

- Supporting transitions during the school day
 - using visual schedules and timers
 - provide verbal reminders
 - allow time to process or absorb information
- Set goals together using the Solution-Focused Goal Setting Tool, display them in different ways and discuss how to achieve them together
- Emphasise process and effort, think about Growth Mindset in the Wellbeing principle
- Give Growth Mindset feedback
- Allow flexibility for time to regulate throughout tasks, model the need to regulate to overcome distraction or fatigue during tasks
- Zone the classroom to signal different areas available to complete the task, e.g standing station, short break area, etc.
- Recognise the context – what is motivating or necessary in one context or at one time can change or may not apply in another context
- Ensure that the environment and activities are culturally representative and inviting to all

Provide Multiple Means of Representation

- Display images in a flexible format – consider font, size, format, visual or audio, there are many possibilities and they depend on the learners you are working with
- Use a total communication approach
- Provide alternatives to text, such as photos and objects of reference
- Pre-teach vocabulary and support with visuals
- Offer an alternative representation when teaching concepts, e.g text and comic strip, diagram and video
- Break tasks into small steps, see: [Get Ready, Do, Done](#) strategy
- Use digital translation tools where necessary
- Activate prior knowledge of topics through discussion, journals, mind-maps, KWL charts and other means
- Chunk instructions to manage tasks, see [Goblin Magic To-do Manager](#)
- Provide multiple ways to take notes and learn, e.g. post its, mind-maps, mini whiteboards or digital options
- Ensure diverse perspectives are represented and that they are complex and authentic portrayals
- Allow text to speech tools where possible

Provide Multiple Means of Action and Expression

- Provide access to alternative technologies such as immersive reader on Microsoft 365, see [video](#)
- Provide multiple media to learn concepts, e.g. maths manipulatives, videos/slide presentations, diagrams, etc.
- Provide tools for creating, e.g. storyboards, text to speech, sentence starters, calculators, etc.
- Use co-teaching to provide more relational opportunities
- Use goal setting; set collaborative intentions for tasks and lessons and use the Solution-Focused Goal Setting Tool for broader goals
- Provide varying feedback, e.g a voice note, a written comment, rubrics
- Provide checklists to guide students through tasks, these can be adapted to the individual, e.g. physical objects or checkbox lists
- Use graphic organisers to organise information or as aids for students to manage tasks
- Teach note-taking skills and offer multiple means of doing so

Get Ready, Do, Done

Get Ready, Do, Done is an executive function planning tool that supports students to develop an understanding of the components and process of completing a multi-step sequence activity. This framework supports future thinking, which is a large component of executive functioning including the ability to plan, organise and manage behaviours for task completion within an allotted time frame. It can be used with the whole class, a group or an individual student.

The process of using this tool starts with the end in mind, imagining what the task will look like when it is all done. Next, working through the sequential steps to “Do” and finally the organisation of resources to “Get Ready”.

The tool is colour coded with yellow for ‘Get Ready’, green for ‘Do’ and red for ‘Done’. It can be used with physical objects, post it notes, written out, drawn or made digitally but should always be colour coded correctly and follow the order as described below:

- Teachers show and demonstrate what **Done** looks like.
- Students problem solve with the teacher what steps are required to achieve their goals and collaboratively identify the steps and time allocation in the **Do** section.
- Students then work out what materials are needed to complete the task in the **Get Ready** column.
- Students are then instructed to go and gather those materials independently, now completing the task in the order: **Get Ready, Do, Done**.
- The last step includes comparing the final product with the plan, visually captured in **Done**.

3. Get Ready
What do I need?

2. Do
What steps do I need
to take to be done?
How long will each step take?

1. Done?
What will it look like
when I am done?



4.

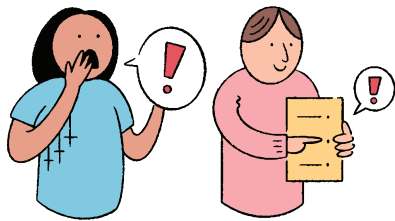
5.

6.

Students say...

When giving instructions, it's great to always write it down as well. It means we have something to go back to if we are finding it hard to process everything at once or if we miss a step or just need to check back on what we need to do.

It's great to get the notes before class, this makes a really big difference!



Use the technology that is already there! If the school has email accounts for students, use them to send the homework, instructions or let students know about a change of plan in advance, e.g. a substitute teacher will be taking the class.

Toolkit



NCSE Plus One Planner



NCSE Get Ready, Do, Done template



[CAST UDL Guidelines](#)



[Step by Step Planner: UDL Lesson Design](#): Support in planning lessons that are UDL centric with a planning template available



[NCCA Additional Support Pathways](#)



[NCCA Assessment Guidelines](#)



[Executive Functioning: Enhancing and Practicing Executive Function Skills with Children from Infancy to Adolescence](#): A resource from Harvard University with executive functioning activities for all development stages.



[Dr Shelley Moore: Shifting to strengths based and inclusive IEPs](#)



[Turning differentiation on its head with Catrina Lowri "Good differentiation should be for everyone"](#)

NCSE TPL



Inclusive Music, Drama and Art for Autistic Learners

Inclusive Teaching and Learning (Post Primary)

Teaching and Learning Approaches for Students with Severe/Profound General Learning Difficulties

Teaching Students with Down Syndrome

Teaching Students with Acquired Brain Injury

Teaching Students with Literacy Difficulties including Dyslexia

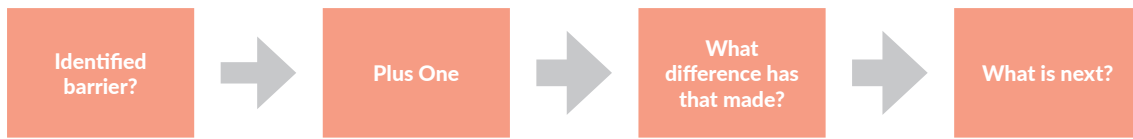
Vision Impairment: Supporting Teaching and Learning

Reflective Questions

- Are my expectations of students' engagement and participation in teaching and learning activities realistic in relation to students' Zone of Proximal Development?
- Do I need to observe my students, source checklists or formal assessments in my school that could help me to find out what my students can do unaided and what they can do with support across a range of different areas?
- When planning teaching and learning activities, am I providing flexible ways for my students to reach a shared goal?
- Do I embrace flexibility and choice in how students engage in their learning? Do I use varied ways to share the new information (verbally, visually, concretely) and do I provide varied options for students to show me what they have learned?
- Do I notice when my students are starting to become dysregulated during teaching and learning? Am I flexible enough to respond in a supportive way, in a way that the student would like?

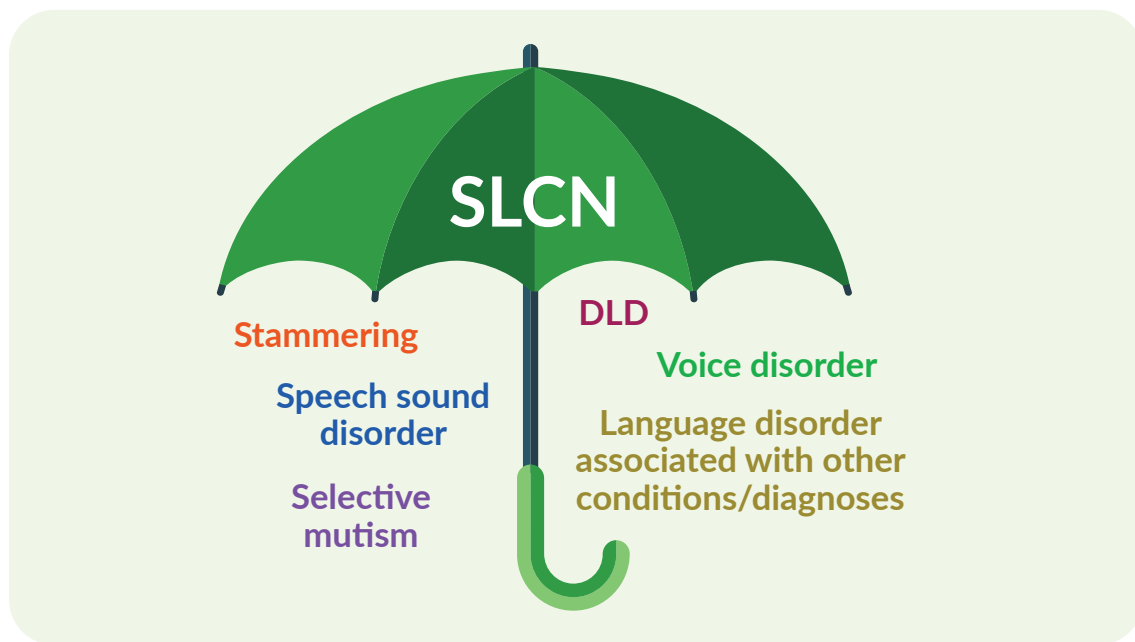
A Plus One Approach

Write any change you are going to make towards your vision. Use this tool to record your steps towards your vision, one action (weekly, monthly, termly or yearly) at a time.



Goal	What I am currently doing	My Plus One (this week/ month/term/year)	Next week/month/ term/year
<i>e.g. including all students when reading texts</i>	<i>All students get their own copy of the novel and get notes ahead of time</i>	<i>All students get their own copy of the novel and get notes ahead of time This year: Provide graphic novel version of the text</i>	<i>All students get their own copy of the novel and get notes ahead of time Provide graphic novel version of the text Next year: Make audio versions of the text available for students</i>

Language and Communication



SLCN

Speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), is an umbrella term that encompasses multiple different profiles of students; including students who are autistic, who stammer, who have a speech sound disorder, voice disorder, or language disorder associated with another condition. Students can have different diagnoses and these will fall under the umbrella of SLCN if there are identified speech, language and communication needs encompassed in and/or associated with this diagnosis.

Students with SLCN can have associated difficulties with:

- Accessing the curriculum
- Academic achievement
- Literacy and numeracy
- Career opportunities
- Social relationships with adults and peers
- Behaviour and emotional development

Prevalence of SLCN

Students with SLCN are often under-identified in schools. Students who experience difficulties or differences with their speech, language or communication skills can therefore be vulnerable to having their needs misinterpreted as “behaviour”, rather than identifying SLCN as a potential stressor contributing to dysregulation and impeding access to the curriculum. When we consider the prevalence of SLCN and the volume of language that students are exposed to, it is paramount that the correct supports are in place in schools to support students to thrive.

Internationally, it is accepted that around 10% of the population have SLCN. In areas of social disadvantage, this figure is significantly higher with up to 50-60% of students entering school with SLCN. Approximately 7% of all students have developmental language disorder (DLD).

At least 3% of all students have SLCN linked with other conditions, including those with autism or general learning difficulties or individuals who are deaf/hard of hearing. The majority of students with additional needs have some degree of SLCN. Of these students, an estimated 1% have the most severe and complex SLCN which prevent them from expressing their basic needs.

Evidence Base of Impact of SLCN

The following studies share the impact that SLCN can have on a student:

International research has identified that 50-80% of students with behaviour difficulties have SLCN (Bryan, Freer, & Furlong, 2007; Snow & Powell, 2008).

Research also points to significant links between SLCN, behaviour and academic difficulties (Beitchman *et al.*, 2001; Locke, Ginsborg *et al.*, 2002; Smart *et al.*, 2003).







A study in the UK found that 66% of excluded males at post-primary level had SLCN (Clegg *et al.*, 2009).

An Irish study found that 95% of post-primary students receiving level 3 support for behaviour had SLCN (Murphy, 2011).

A study in the UK found that 46-67% of youth offenders have SLCN (Bryan *et al.*, 2007).

Children with a poor vocabulary at five years of age, are four times more likely to struggle with reading in adulthood and three times more likely to have mental health issues (Law *et al.*, 2017).

For further information on SLCN

-  [NCSE video: Speech, Language and Communication – An Introduction](#)
-  [NCSE video: Supporting SLCN in the Primary Classroom – Simple Strategies](#)
-  [NCSE video: Developmental Language Disorder – What is it?](#)
-  [Speech, Language and Communication Needs](#)
-  [NCSE Communication Profiling Checklist \(Primary\)](#)
-  [NCSE Communication Profiling Checklist \(Post-primary\)](#)

Strategies to Support Students' Language and Communication





Visual Strategies to Support Students' Language and Communication

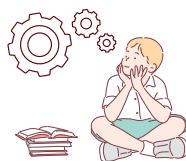
The implementation of visuals forms part of a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach. 'Visual strategies', 'visual supports' or 'visuals' include using objects, objects of reference, photos, signs, writing, physical demonstration, symbols or pictures in a way that supports understanding, expression and social inclusion and participation, along with creating an inclusive learning environment for students.

Language is transient; when something is said orally, the message can be lost if it is not processed immediately. Visuals support all students. Students without additional support needs report using visual timetables as often as those with additional needs (Rutherford *et al.*, 2020). This shows us that the visuals we put in place for students with additional needs may also benefit students in classrooms more generally and should be used as a universal, whole-class strategy.

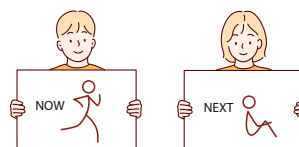
9 REASONS TO USE VISUALS



Visuals are permanent
(Spoken words disappear)



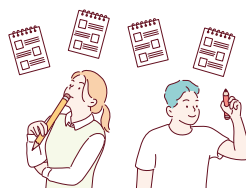
Visuals allow time for
language processing



Visuals prepare
students for transitions



Visuals help students
see what you mean



Visuals help all students



Visuals help build independence



Visuals are transferable between
environments and people



Visuals have no attitude,
no tone, no frustration,
no disapproval



Visuals help reduce
anxiety

Visuals can help **students' understanding** of:

- Teacher instructions
- Tasks and activities
- Routines (and changes in routines)
- Curriculum content
- Language concepts and vocabulary

Visuals can help **support students'**:

- Organisation and memory
- Self-management
- Understanding of social interactions

Top Tips for Implementation of Visual Supports



Standardise

Standardising visuals across the whole school, ensure students are not required to re-learn visual supports when they change class or teacher.



Repeat

Lots of exposure and repetition may be needed before the benefits and effects of the visual support are apparent.



Keep it Meaningful

Keep visuals meaningful and functional for the class group. Choose a visual support that is based on the class group's needs, interests and learning experiences.



Consider Placement

Consider the positioning of visuals – ensure they are clearly visible for all students by placing them in prominent places at eye level.



Be Consistent

Ensure all staff members, e.g. class teacher, SNA, SET use the visual support in the same way each time, especially when first introducing the visual support.



Make Visuals Interactive

Refer to the visual supports and interact with them throughout the day. Visual supports are created to be interacted with.



Make Visuals Accessible for All

Avoid too much visual clutter in the classroom. Ensure visuals are accessible to all students, consider enlarging visual supports, increasing font sizes or providing individual visuals to students with additional needs.



Include Student voice

Continuously check in with students on the current use and engagement of visual supports. Ask students questions like “Can you understand what the visual means?” or, “Can you see the visual clearly?”



Vocabulary Strategies to Support Students' Language and Communication

Vocabulary learning is one of the most significant problems experienced by students with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), (Bishop, 1997; Gathercole, 1993; Sim, 1998).

Vocabulary is the building block of language. Without good foundational vocabulary skills there will likely be difficulties later on with other areas of language and learning, and often behaviour. It is important at this point to emphasise that vocabulary refers to both expressive language and receptive language. It is sometimes thought that vocabulary refers to only the words we say, but vocabulary also relates to our understanding and the processing of words that we hear.

The STAR Approach

Reliance on incidental word learning is not enough for many students. One effective way to teach vocabulary is by taking the **STAR (Select, Teach, Activate, Review)** approach, based on the work of Parsons and Branagan (2017) and used within the NCSE's TalkTime intervention, which is referenced in the Primary Language Curriculum.

STAR involves:

- Select the most useful vocabulary (i.e. Tier 2 words are considered to be really useful words as they build on conceptual understanding and are likely to be encountered in lots of contexts, including different lessons and in spoken and written language, e.g. explain, deliberate, categorise, fortunate, hilarious, separate, climate, etc.).
- Teach the selected vocabulary in a structured manner.
- Activate the meaning by using the words in context.
- Review the taught words to ensure they are retained.

The **STAR** approach can be used to support vocabulary development of students at a universal, targeted or individual level in the continuum of support, and across special school, primary and post-primary schools.

Vocabulary resources that can be used to provide materials and/or to support vocabulary development include:

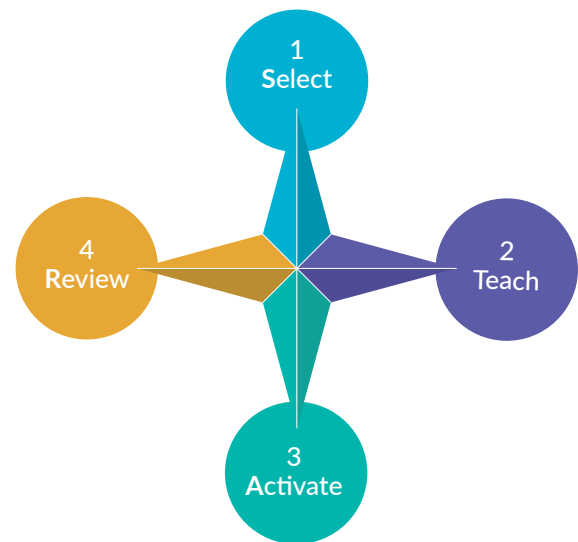
Primary

- **TalkTime:** NCSE and Curriculum Online
- **TalkBoost** (Key Stage 1 for children aged 4-7/ Key Stage 2 for children aged 7-10)
- **Word Aware:** Teaching Vocabulary Across the Day Across the Curriculum by Stephen Parsons and Anna Branagan/Word Aware 2: Teaching Vocabulary Across the Early Years by Stephen Parsons and Anna Branagan
- **Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction** by Beck, McKeown and Kucan

Post Primary

- The **Vocabulary Enrichment Intervention Programme** by Victoria Joffe (2011) is a structured intervention to develop vocabulary skills in post primary aged student
- STAR (Select, Teach, Activate, Review) approach. This is based on **Word Aware**, the work of Parsons and Branagan (2017)
- **Fruyer Model**

Vocabulary Development








General Tips to Support Language and Communication in the Classroom

	<p>Pause and Pace</p> <p>Pause for up to 10 seconds after giving instructions/information to give students time to process language. It's helpful to use a slower rate of speech too. An appropriate rate of speech for teaching is slower than the rate of speech used in conversation with colleagues/friends.</p>
	<p>Repeat</p> <p>Repeat the phrase or key words to allow the student time to process and comprehend what has been said. Create a culture in your class that encourages students to check and clarify (e.g. ask for repetition) when they have not understood something.</p>
	<p>Explain</p> <p>Take the time to explain new words, non-literal or figurative language, such as idioms and multiple meanings words.</p>
	<p>Positive Statements</p> <p>Positive statements reduce the language demand on students by telling a student what they should do rather than what not to do. These statements limit the amount of language the student has to process.</p> <p>For example, instead of saying "Don't walk on the grass", try "Walk on the path".</p>
	<p>Reduce and Rephrase</p> <p>Reduce the language load of an instruction by decreasing the length and complexity of your sentence. You can replace key words with easier words. You can also consider chunking longer instructions.</p> <p>When giving an instruction or information, breaking it down in to manageable chunks makes it easier for students with comprehension difficulties to follow, process and understand. Example of chunking:</p> <p>"When you come in, sit down, get out your books and turn to page 51 paragraph 3 section 5 but before that pick up the document on your desk, consider the information and fill it out"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "We are going to do 3 things" (hold up three fingers) • "First read the page on your desk" (show page) • "Then fill it out" • "Lastly, get out your books" (show book) "and turn to:" <p>(Written on board) "page 51, paragraph 3, section 5 and begin reading"</p>

NCSE TPL

-  Lámh (Module 1)
-  Language and Communication for Autistic Students in the Mainstream Classroom
-  The SCERTS Model (Social Communication, Emotional Regulation and Transactional Supports)



The Power of Playful Pedagogy

“Throughout childhood, play is of value in and of itself, and children have both a right and a desire to play.”

(NCCA, 2023)

Children need stable and nurturing relationships with adults in order to thrive, and play provides the opportunity to develop these relationships in a powerful manner. The power of play lies in the fact that it is an opportunity for adults to observe and understand non-verbal behaviour and to share in the joy that children express in their interests through play. In times of toxic stress during childhood, play becomes even more important. The shared joy and interaction that children and adults can experience through playful experiences can regulate the body’s stress response (Yogman *et al.*, 2018).

By infusing playfulness through all classroom interactions and learning experiences, teachers can promote engagement and interest, and also prevent anxiety. Playfulness can refer to feelings of light-heartedness, pleasure and joy, it can also refer to behaviours that are characterised by expressiveness, creativity and good humour (Sproule *et al.*, 2019).

There is strong evidence that playful pedagogies that support children’s play skills will also develop self-regulation skills. During play children use and improve self-regulation skills, by paying attention, following instructions, and taking on roles in the play (Neslihan Bay, 2023; Savina, 2020).

A playful approach in tone, body language and interaction can be de-escalating in times of tension. See section on [PACE](#).

Play has been introduced into CAST’s UDL Guidelines 3.0 – [Guideline 7.3 ‘Nurture Joy and Play’](#) under multiple means of engagement. Play is cited as an approach that “supports the learning and development of learners of all ages – from young children to adults”.

What Does It Look Like in Post Primary?

Giving students opportunities to engage in play fulfils a crucial stage in teenage development: increased independence and ownership of their own learning. Dependent on the developmental stage of individuals/ groups, playful learning in a post-primary setting generally focuses more on social elements. While there are no prescriptive activities that denote playfulness – these activities may include: hands-on and exploratory learning, creative expression and activities deemed by students as non-didactic. It is important to note the role of the teacher. A curious, enthusiastic approach to scaffolding the activity removes the barrier of teacher as all-knowing and challenges adolescent students to come to their own conclusions. The teacher’s tone of voice, body language and stance sets the tone for the activity. In this sense, it is the approach and not necessarily the activity that prompts playfulness.

Examples of playful approaches in post primary:

- Any activities that involve movement. For example, walking debates. This extends learning as well as allowing for students to regulate.
- Having class outside-time away from books, technology and exam key words will benefit student wellbeing and promote curiosity and creativity.
- Recognising yourself as an important resource – your energy, stance and tone of voice all affect how adolescents engage in playful learning activities. (See [PACE approach in Relationships Element](#))

Subject specific examples:

- In History, presenting your Industrial Revolution invention to Dragon's Den judges.
- An engineering class where each student or group becomes an engine component and forming a human engine.
- Speed dating as Gaeilge/en Espa ola.
- Acting out the emotions of a poem/stages of a river.

Resources



[Playful Structure: Six Pillars of Developmentally Appropriate Practice](#)



[Curriculum Online: Infusing Playfulness](#)



[Key Skills of Junior Cycle: Being Creative](#)



[Seeking Play by How Might We](#)



[PEDAL: Play in Education, Development & Learning](#)

NCSE TPL



Play as an Inclusive Strategy

Intensive Interaction

Attention Autism

DIR Floortime