Get Ready for Learning:

Oral Language Intervention for Children Learning English as an Additional Language and Monolingual Children with Language Weaknesses

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Introduction

In UK primary schools 19.4% of children are learning English as an Additional Language (EAL; DfES, 2015). That is to say, a large proportion of children are simultaneously accessing the school curriculum and acquiring proficiency in the language of instruction. At primary school children learning EAL tend to show poorer performance on statutory tests of language and literacy compared to their monolingual peers (DfES, 2014; Strand, 2015). This achievement gap does diminish significantly with age although specific risk factors may leave a proportion of children vulnerable to continued difficulties (Strand, 2015). A significant proportion of monolingual children also start school with weak oral language skills and these children are at risk of poor educational outcomes (e.g. Law, Todd, Clark, Mroz & Carr, 2013; Lee, 2013). It is vital therefore that we support the language and literacy development of these vulnerable groups of children. In this report we present the findings from an evaluation of an oral language programme, Get Ready for Learning (GR4L), designed for young children learning EAL and monolingual English speaking peers with language weaknesses. The outcomes from our main study demonstrate improvements in vocabulary knowledge but no generalisation to broader language skills. Generalisation was found in a smaller feasibility study following the initial RCT which evaluated the impact of the intervention when delivered in real-world conditions and to examine staff perspectives on the programme. The findings from both studies are discussed in relation to the challenges of delivering small group and individual support to mono- and multilingual vulnerable learners in UK primary school classrooms. Both studies were funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

Background

Reading involves much more than the ability to recognise words on the page and there is increasing acknowledgment of the important role that language plays in the development of reading skills. For example, the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer 1986) suggests that successful reading involves both decoding[1] and language comprehension; both skills are necessary and neither is sufficient on its own. Research demonstrates that children who are learning EAL show difficulties

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[1] decoding - matching the letters in a word to their corresponding sounds and blending them together to read the word

with reading comprehension despite adequate decoding and word reading skills (Babayiğit, 2015; Babayiğit, 2014; Burgoyne et al., 2009; Burgoyne et al., 2011; Lesaux et al., 2010). As such, it is likely that the source of their difficulties lies in their broader language skills and indeed children learning EAL tend to show poorer performance on measures of language including vocabulary knowledge and listening comprehension (e.g. Babayigit, 2015; Babayiğit, 2014; Burgoyne et al., 2009; Burgoyne et al., 2011). So how do we support the language development of this group of vulnerable learners in order to support the development of their reading comprehension skills?

There is a growing body of research exploring successful ways to support the language development of young children at risk of literacy difficulties. Recently Snowling and Hulme (2011) noted that successful interventions must be built on a sound evidence base and emphasise the need for a "virtuous circle" (p4) when designing and evaluating intervention programmes. This means that theory, research and practice form a continuous feedback loop. They point out that while theory can help us to understand the nature of children's difficulties and design interventions to target specific areas, it is only through research and practice that we can tell whether an intervention is successful. Moreover, Snowling and Hulme (2011) strongly advocate the use of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) in the evaluation of interventions.   In such a study children are randomly allocated to receive either the intervention programme or to be in a 'control group' who receive no intervention, an alternative intervention or take part in the intervention at a later time point. In all cases, both the intervention group and the control group all receive treatment or schooling as usual during the intervention period - the only difference between the two groups is therefore receipt of intervention or not. Using random assignment in this way increases the chances of any existing individual differences which might affect the outcomes of the study being equally spread across the two groups. For example, when allocating children to an intervention group and a waiting control group you may understandably try to put all the children with the weakest skills in the intervention group to ensure they receive treatment first. However, by doing this you make it difficult to interpret the results since one group would be much worse before they started treatment than the other group. Using random allocation would mean that the children with the weakest skills would be equally likely to be

allocated to the intervention group as to the control group. This provides the most robust way of evaluating the impact of the intervention.

Our previous evaluations of oral language interventions using RCT methodology have had promising results. For example, Bowyer-Crane et al. (2008) compared an oral language intervention (OL) with a phonology and reading programme (P+R). Delivered by trained teaching assistants (TA) to children in UK reception classes, the programmes ran for 20 weeks and alternated between group and individual sessions. Differential effects were found such that the OL programme facilitated the development of vocabulary and grammar while the P+R programme improved children's word-level reading skills. Using a similar model, Fricke et al. (2013) evaluated a 30 week programme that started in nursery and continued into reception classes. The results of this study were particularly encouraging with improvements in taught vocabulary as well as improvements on measures of vocabulary knowledge, grammar, and reading comprehension. Other researchers have found similar results (e.g. Bianco et al., 2010).   However, the majority of studies investigating oral language intervention, including those cited here, have been carried out with monolingual native speaking children. Far fewer studies have been carried out evaluating effective support for children learning to read and write in a second language, and the majority of these studies have been carried out in the US (Murphy, 2015).   In a recent report, Murphy (2015) provides clear evidence of the need for more intervention research focused on children learning EAL in a UK context.

Our Research

There is a strong theoretical and practical rationale for evaluating the effectiveness of oral language interventions for children learning EAL. This research asked whether the methods and teaching approaches used in our previous research would be appropriate for children learning EAL.   We also included a comparison group of monolingual English speaking children with language weaknesses. This group of children forms an important comparison group to our EAL cohort as they may display very similar difficulties to the EAL group but for different reasons. However, the approaches used to support these children are often used with EAL children even though it is not clear that the same approaches will work with both groups.

Study 1 - Randomised Controlled Trial

Method

Participants

We compared the progress of our EAL children with a group of monolingual children whose language skills were below those of their classroom peers. A total of 160 children from ten schools were selected to take part in this study; 80 children were learning EAL and 80 were monolingual English speakers. The language background of the EAL group is shown in figure 1. The children were selected according to their scores on a set of language measures; Nonword Repetition, Expressive Vocabulary and Sentence Structure, and the 16 children (eight monolingual and eight EAL) with the weakest scores in each school were offered the opportunity to take part in the programme.
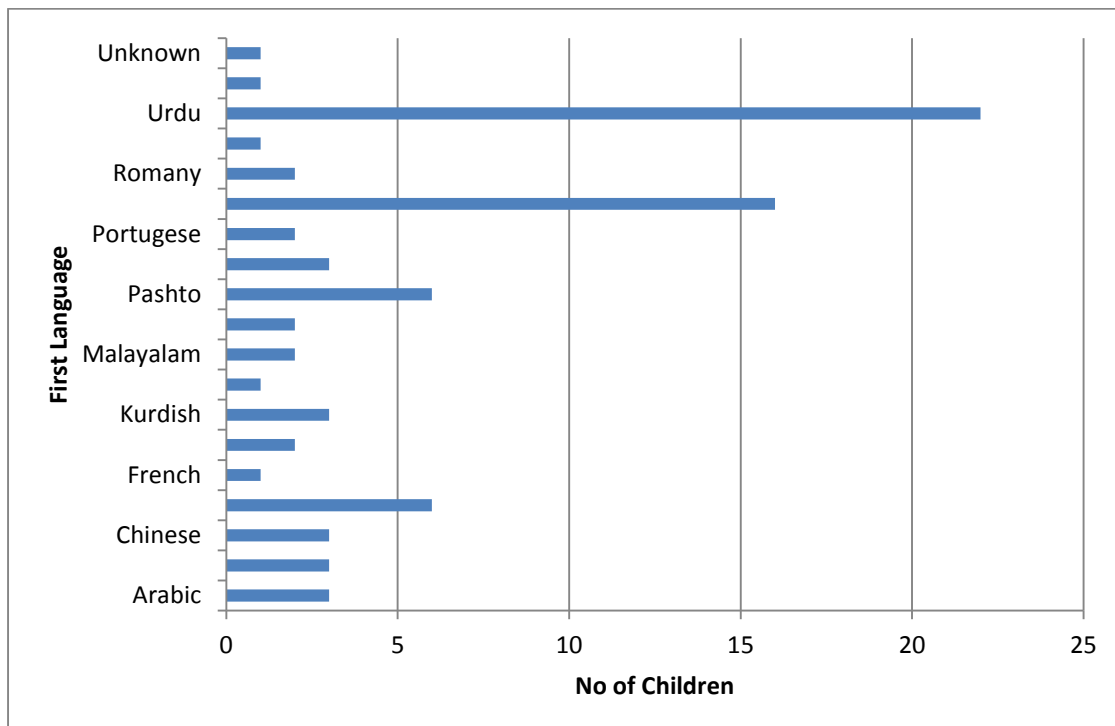

Figure 1 Language background of children learning EAL (n=80)

Design

The programme ran as an RCT with children being randomly allocated to either the intervention or control group following an initial screening and selecting procedure. Within each school eight children were allocated to each group, four monolingual English speakers and four children learning EAL. Children were then assessed at regular intervals over the course of the project (see figure 2). This report focuses on the main findings of the project and reports results from screening and pre-test

(before the intervention), post-test (immediately after the intervention) and the first maintenance test (6 months after the intervention). Children in the intervention group received 18 weeks of intervention delivered in their school setting by a trained TA. Children in the control group received instruction as usual until the initial maintenance test phase (*t4*) was completed. At this point they were offered an alternative intervention programme designed for their age group as the GR4L programme was aimed at younger children.
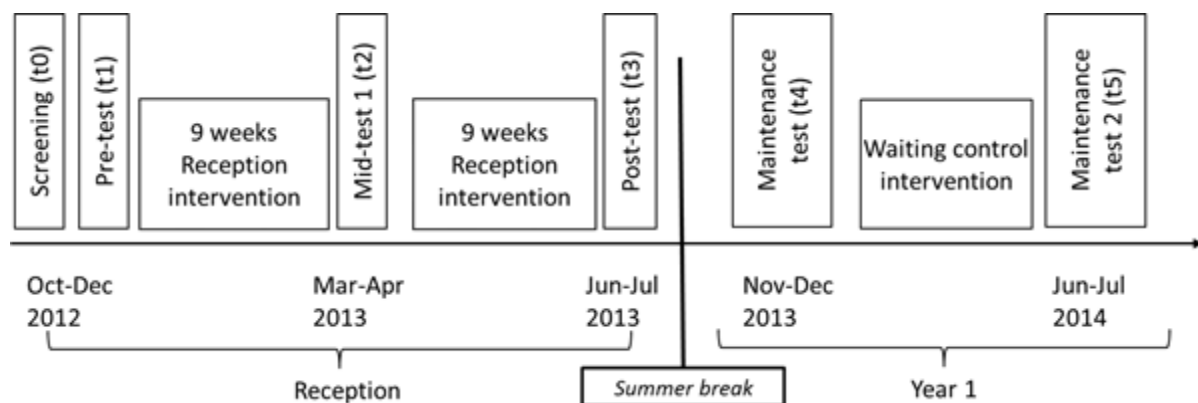

Figure 2 Timeline of 18 weeks intervention and assessments

Measures

Children's language and literacy skills were assessed at each time point and a measure of nonverbal IQ was included in the pre-test battery of measures (*t1*). An overview of tests at each time point can be found in the appendix along with details of the published tests used. Our primary outcome measures were vocabulary knowledge, grammar, listening comprehension and narrative skills. Our secondary outcome measures were phonological awareness and literacy skills.

Language Skills

Vocabulary knowledge, or knowledge of word meanings, was tested using a picture naming task (Expressive Vocabulary). Children also completed a task in which children had to answer a question by describing what they saw in a picture i.e. "what has happened to the dog?; what has the cat just done?" (Action Picture Test - Information score).

Children's knowledge of the words taught in the intervention was assessed using both a picture naming task (Taught Vocabulary - Naming) and a task in which children were asked to give definitions for 18 of the taught words (Definitions Task).

Children's knowledge of grammar was measured using two tasks. In the *Sentence Structure* test children listened to a sentence and were asked to choose one of four pictures which goes with the sentence they heard. Their responses on the *Action Picture Test* were also scored according to the grammatical structure of their answer (*Action Picture Test* - Grammar score).

To measure *Listening Comprehension* children listened to a short story and answered a set of 8 comprehension questions.

Children were given a story retelling task in which they were told a story accompanied by pictures and were asked to retell the story in their own words (*Narrative Production*). They were asked questions about the story to gain a *Narrative Comprehension* score and completed a *Comprehension Monitoring* task in which they were asked to spot points in the story that did not make sense.

Phonological Skills

Children's phonological awareness[2] was measured using sound isolation, sound blending and sound deletion tasks.

- *Sound Isolation* - Children are asked to identify the first or last sound they hear in a nonsense word, i.e. "Say Bem. Now tell me the first sound it makes."
- *Sound Blending* task - Children are asked to blend sounds together to form words, i.e. /b/ - /ee/ = bee, /r/ - /o/ - /c/ = rock
- *Sound deletion* - Children are asked to say a word with one sound missing, i.e. sheep without "sh" or boat without "t" or parrot without "p"

A *Nonword Repetition* task was used to measure children's phonological processing ability at the beginning of the intervention. Children simply heard nonsense words and were asked to repeat them back to the tester (e.g. shameen, nanarba).

Literacy Skills

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[2] Phonological awareness is the ability to reflect on and manipulate the sound structure of spoken language

To measure *Letter-Sound Knowledge* children were shown a set of printed letters and asked to produce the sound of each letter. Children completed a standardised version of this task and they were also asked to name the specific letters taught during the intervention.

Children's single word reading ability was assessed using the *Early Word Recognition* test in which they were asked to read 15 regular and 15 irregular words.

To measure *Reading Comprehension* children were asked to read two short stories and answer 8 questions about each story.

Spelling was measured by giving children pictures to name and spell.

Nonverbal IQ was measured using the *Block Design* test in which children arrange blocks to match a picture.

Intervention

The GR4L Programme runs over an 18 week period divided into two 9 week blocks. Children cover 6 different topics, one new topic every 3 weeks: Me and My Body, Things We Wear, People Around Us, Time, Journey, Growing. Each 9 week block consists of 27 group sessions and 18 individual sessions. Children receive 3 x 30 minute group sessions and 2 x 15 minute individual sessions each week.

Each group session follows the same structure, as does each individual session (see table 1). The content of the group sessions was prescribed while individual sessions were designed to be flexible to meet the needs of individual children. TAs who delivered the intervention received an extensive manual containing a session by session guide for the group sessions and a range of activities that could be used in the individual sessions.

Table 1 Breakdown of group and individual sessions in the GR4L programme

Group Session	Individual Session
Introduction	Introduction
Vocabulary Reinforcement	Phonological Awareness
Phonological Awareness/phoneme awareness and letter sound knowledge	Vocabulary Reinforcement
New Vocabulary	Narrative
Narrative	Plenary
Plenary	

Group Sessions

Introduction

The introduction is used to encourage good listening. In the first session children are introduced to a teddy bear called Ted who has three listening rules; good looking, good listening and good sitting. Children are asked to follow these rules in each session and one child will be given Ted's Star Award at the end of the session if they have tried hard to follow the rules. The days of the week are also revised in each session.

Vocabulary

Children were taught new words in each session which were then revised in the following session. The words were selected in consultation with Early Years teachers and Speech and Language Therapists. A multi-contextual method of teaching was used based on the work of Isabel Beck and colleagues (Beck et al., 2002, 2007). This method fosters a deep understanding of words by asking children to use the words in context rather than simply providing them with a definition. Children are also encouraged to use the words during the phonological awareness and narrative activities.

Phonological Awareness

In the first 9 weeks of the intervention, short phonological awareness games at the syllable[3] and onset-rhyme[4] level are played in each session to develop children's ability to reflect on the sound structure of spoken words. In the second 9 week block letter knowledge and phoneme[5] awareness activities are introduced which focus on developing children's ability to map the letters they read onto the sounds they hear and blend and segment them for reading and spelling respectively.

Narrative

In the narrative activities children are introduced to key story elements (who, what, where, when, why). They are also encouraged to make inferences, use dialogue, recognise emotion, and sequence events. Activities in this section include story retelling, role play and Q&A activities. A range of narratives are used, e.g. personal narratives, fairy tales and picture stories. Comprehension monitoring activities are also built into the narrative section of the session; activities that develop the ability to recognise when comprehension breaks down and use strategies to repair the error e.g. asking for clarification or explanation.

Plenary

The plenary provides another opportunity to encourage children's sequencing of events. By revisiting the activities carried out in each session children will consolidate their knowledge and become confident in providing a coherent account of an event. Ted's Star Award is also given out during the plenary and all the children receive a sticker or stamp for their chart.

Individual Sessions

Introduction

The introduction in the individual sessions follows a similar pattern to the group sessions with the exception of Ted's Star Award which is only used in group sessions.

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[3] Syllables are the units of sound that make up a word. Words contain one syllable i.e. cat, or more than one syllable i.e. rain-bow, car-ou-sel

[4] A syllable can be broken into two parts: onset-rime. The onset is the first consonant or consonant blend and the rime is the vowel and remaining consonants e.g. p-ark, b-ank, st-ick.

[5] A phoneme is the smallest speech sound in a word e.g. /m/ in mouse

Phonological Awareness

Work in the individual sessions focuses on phonological awareness activities at the level appropriate for the child, i.e. syllable, rhyme or phoneme. TAs can use the activities introduced in group sessions or select from a bank of extra activities provided.

Vocabulary Reinforcement

This section of the session provides TAs with an opportunity to consolidate children's knowledge of the words introduced in the previous sessions. TAs are encouraged to focus on words children were particularly struggling with using the flashcards and resources used in the group sessions.

Narrative

When working with individual children the narrative work is spread across two sessions. In the first session children are encouraged to tell a story using picture prompts with minimal help from the TA. This story is recorded by the TA who then scores it and selects teaching points to work on in the next session. In the next session the story is read to the child and the TA then works with the child on developing the chosen aspects of the story. For example, they may help the child use complete sentences, include missing story elements or sequence the story correctly.

Plenary

This section draws the session to a close. The TA revisits with the child what they have done in the session and gives them a reward stamp or sticker.

TA Training and Monitoring

TAs received two days of training before starting the intervention and a third day midway through. The training provided a theoretical background to the study as well as specific training on the teaching principles, programme structure and delivery of the programme. TAs were given the opportunity to practice elements of the intervention and were fully trained in keeping records of each session. They attended fortnightly tutorials and were also observed delivering at least one group

and one individual session in each 9 week block of intervention and provided with feedback.

Findings

Children were assessed at five points over the course of the study; before the intervention, after 9 weeks of intervention, immediately after the intervention, 6 months after the intervention and 12 months after the intervention. This report focuses on outcomes immediately after the intervention and after a 6 month delay. During this 6 month delay none of the children in the intervention or waiting control group received any extra input from the research team; all children received schooling as usual including any additional support already provided by the school. Outcomes measured at these time points allow us to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention by comparing the intervention group with the waiting control group. Outcomes measured 12 months after the intervention are not included in this report. At this point the waiting control group had received intervention and therefore could not act as a comparison group.

Figures 3 and 4 show the difference between the intervention and waiting control group immediately after the intervention (figure 3) and 6 months later (figure 4) displayed as effect sizes. Effect sizes give an indication of the size of the treatment effect, i.e. how much of a difference there is between the intervention and control group. An effect size of .20 is small, .50 is medium and .80 is large. Bars above the line indicate an advantage for the children in the intervention group. Asterisks on the figures indicate that the difference between groups is statistically significant. This means that the difference between groups is unlikely to have occurred by chance. Since the difficulties experienced by many children learning EAL may have different underlying causes than monolingual children with language weaknesses, we may have seen differences in response to intervention. However, initial analyses did not show marked differences between groups and therefore in all cases the EAL and

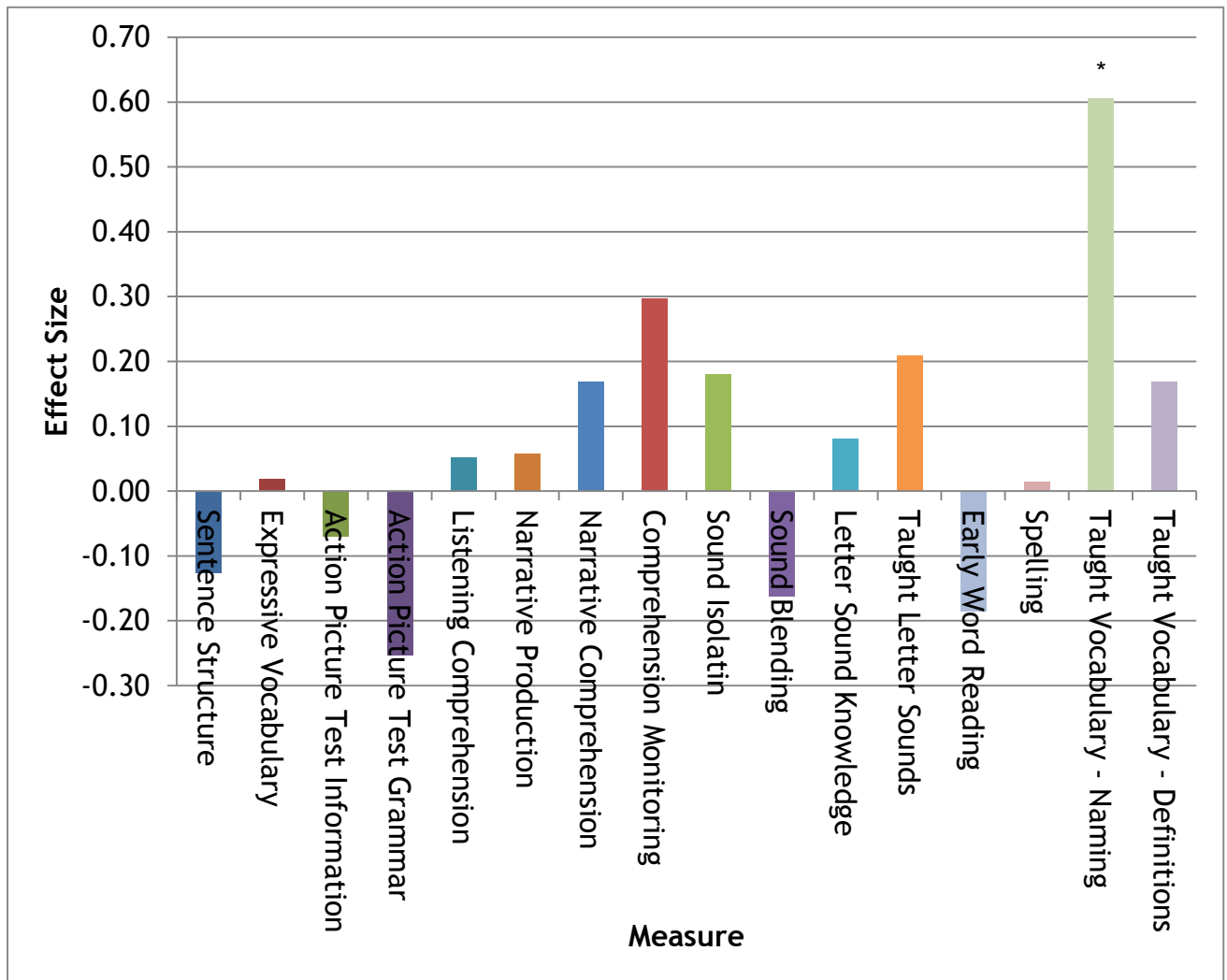monolingual groups are combined.

Figure 3 - Difference between intervention group and waiting control group immediately after the intervention expressed as effect size. Asterisks indicate a statistically significant difference.
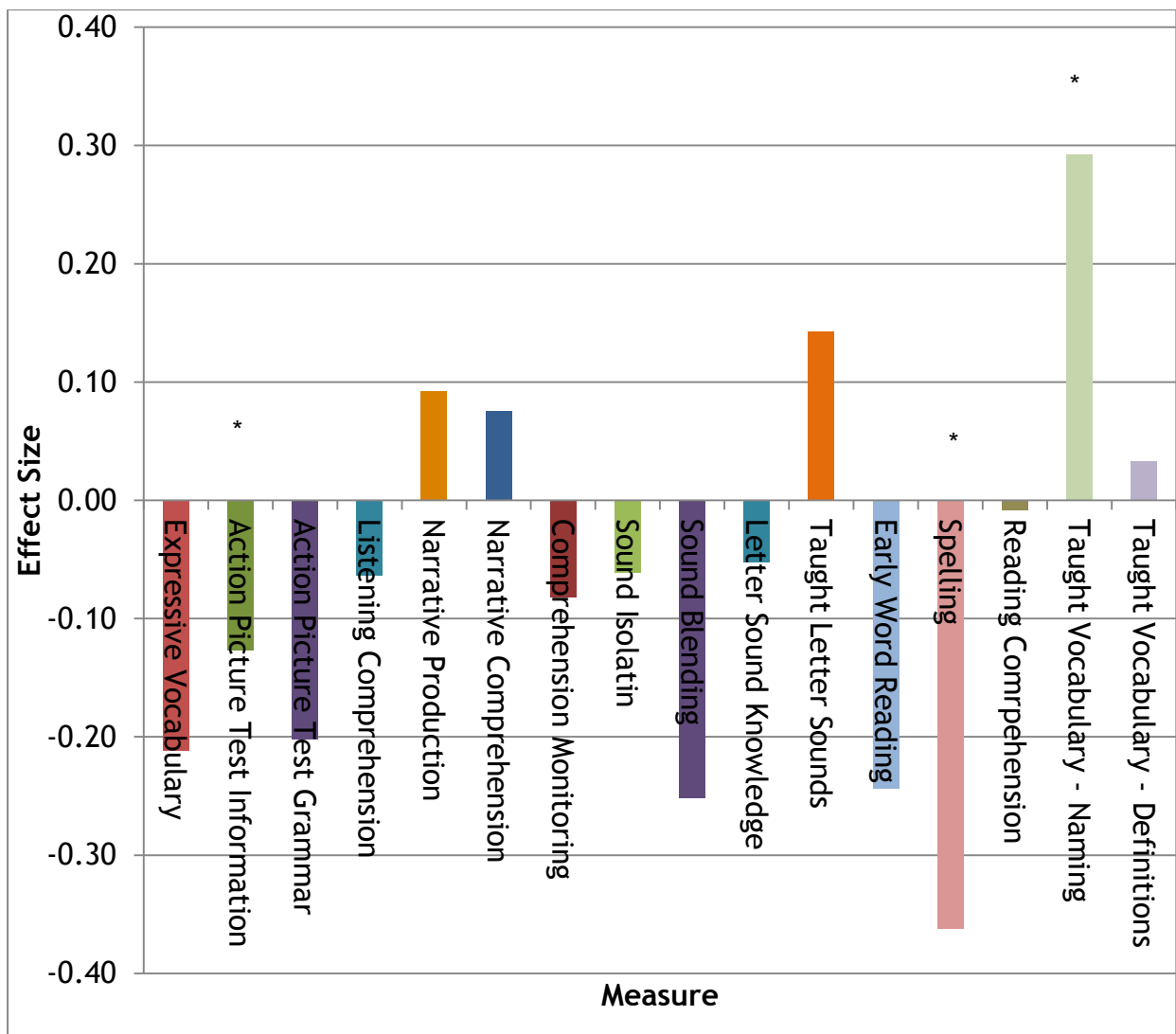
Figure 4 - Difference between intervention group and waiting control group 6 months after the intervention expressed as effect size. Asterisks indicate a statistically significant difference.

The effect sizes in figure 3 suggest that the groups differ on a number of measures with small to moderate effect sizes immediately after the intervention. In particular, the intervention group showed an advantage over the waiting control group for comprehension monitoring with an effect size of .30. However, the only statistically significant difference was the advantage shown by the intervention group on taught vocabulary. Figure 4 shows that after a 6 month delay the intervention group show a statistically significant advantage on a measure of taught vocabulary while the waiting control group show a statistically significant advantage on the Action Picture Test (APT) Information and Spelling measures.

Discussion

To summarise, our intervention showed immediate effects on taught vocabulary - a skill that was directed targeted by the intervention programme. However, these effects did not extend to standardised measures of language – our primary outcome measures. Six months after the intervention, the waiting control group performed better on a measure of spelling – a secondary outcome, and the APT information – one of the measures used to assess the primary outcome vocabulary. Our intervention group still maintained an advantage on taught vocabulary. The findings of this study were disappointing and not in line with findings from our previous intervention work. There are a number of possible reasons for this including a) the design of the intervention, b) the implementation of the programme and c) the children taking part.

a) Design of intervention

Our previous programmes designed for monolingual children with language weaknesses have produced positive results (Bowyer-Crane et al., 2008; Fricke et al., 2013). The current programme followed the same structure as our previous programmes taking into account previous work on intervention with EAL children (Baker, 2006; Castro, Páez, Dickinson, & Frede, 2011; Kohnert & Medina, 2009; Lesaux, 2006; Paradis, Genesee, & Crago, 2011; Stow & Dodd, 2003) as well as recent reports outlining the specific needs of this group (Allen, 2011; August & Shanahan, 2006; Tickell, 2011). Otherwise, the programme took the same broad approach to intervention targeting a number of different language skills including vocabulary, narrative, listening and comprehension monitoring. However, this approach to intervention may not have been appropriate for this group of children, and a targeted approach focusing on one aspect of language may have yielded more successful results. Moreover, this intervention programme ran for 18 weeks compared to the 30 week programme of Fricke et al. (2013) which may have been an insufficient amount of time to see any generalised progress.

b) Implementation of the programme

Of a possible 54 group sessions, children attended an average of 46 sessions, and of a possible 36 individual sessions children attended an average of 22.5 sessions, far fewer than expected. This was partly due to student absence and partly due to other factors. For example, delivering this programme was a complex undertaking,

particularly in terms of the individual sessions which TAs needed to plan to meet the needs of the individual children. In feedback from TAs, this was one of the most challenging aspects of the programme, and our teaching observations showed that TAs found scaffolding activities to meet children's needs particularly difficult. In addition, TAs found it difficult to fit in this intensive intervention, including the planning and preparation required, find space to run the intervention and cope with child absence from sessions. As such, TAs were inclined to focus on the group sessions where time was tight, as evidenced by the low number of individual sessions delivered. TAs were all observed delivering a group session and an individual session in each intervention block i.e. 2 group sessions and 2 individual sessions per TA. Quality of teaching was given a rating of 1 - 5 during these observations (1 = several intervention aspects missing or not satisfactorily delivered, 2 = some intervention aspects missing or not satisfactorily delivered, 3 = delivered according to manual, 4 = delivered according to manual with good use of resources, questions and techniques to support language, 5 = delivered according to manual with very good use of resources, questions and techniques to support language). Mean quality ratings can be seen in Table 2 which shows marginal improvements in both group and individual sessions over time but much lower quality ratings for individual than for group sessions in both 9 week blocks.

Intervention Block	Group Session		Individual Session	
	Mean (SD)	Range	Mean (SD)	Range
Part 1	3.02 (0.75)	1.42 -3.92	2.72 (0.55)	1.58 - 3.42
Part 2	3.30 (0.96)	1.43 - 4.57	2.83 (0.90)	1.33 - 4.00

Table 2 - Mean quality of teaching ratings with standard deviations in parentheses.

Environmental factors may also have played a role. For example, sessions were not always delivered in quiet areas and disruptions were common. On a more positive note, lack of treatment effects may have been a result of more language activities taking place in schools meaning that the children in the control group also received good quality language support.

c) Children taking part in the study

In terms of our participants, the majority of schools were recruited from deprived areas and the children taking part in the study were selected as having the weakest oral language skills in their year group. The combination of these two factors puts these children at particular risk of continued difficulties (e.g. Strand et al., 2015; Marulis & Neuman, 2010). As such the children selected may not have had adequate initial oral language skills to access the programme. They may have required a more targeted approach delivered by individuals with a greater level of expertise or an intervention delivered over a longer period of time.

Study 2 – Feasibility Study

Following our main evaluation, we were contacted by an additional school who asked to run the intervention in their settings. This provided us with the opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme when delivered under real life conditions and to collect detailed feedback from staff. We were able to assess and monitor the children in this school over the course of the intervention and collect data from staff regarding the implementation of the programme. A second school in the same area also wanted to implement the programme and we were able to interview a member of staff from that school regarding the implementation of the programme but were unfortunately not able to follow the progress of the children.

Method

Participants

A total of 22 children in one school took part in the programme; 8 children in Reception and 14 children in Year 1. As in the main study, the children were randomly allocated to an intervention group (n=11) and a waiting control group (n=11). All of the children taking part were learning EAL (see figure 5).
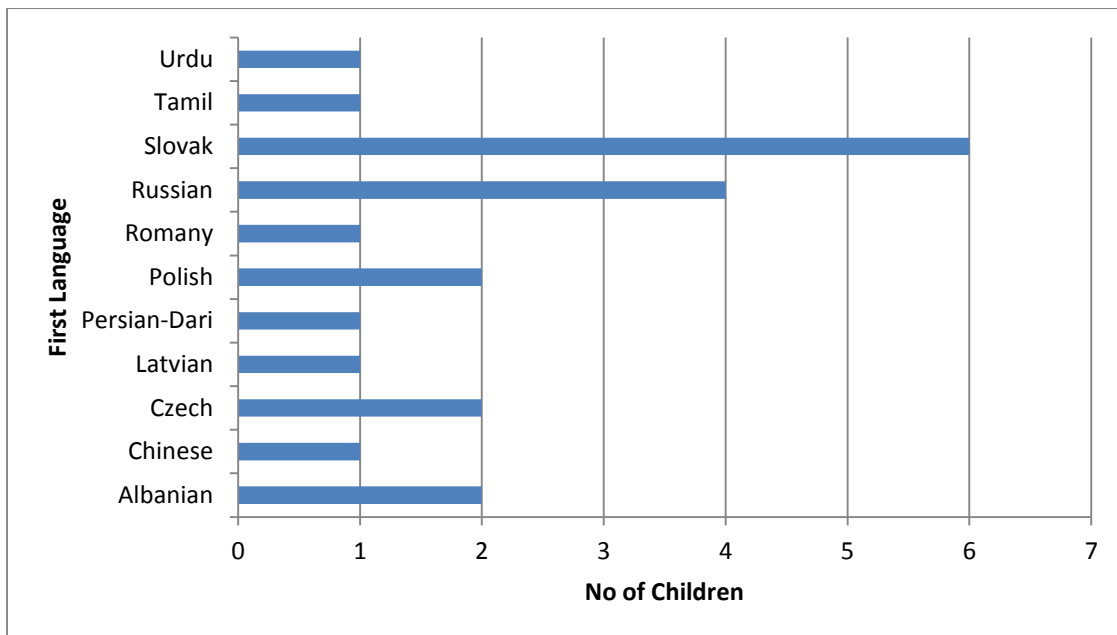
Figure 5 Language background of children taking part in feasibility study

Design

The study used random allocation within year groups; 4 Reception children and 7 Year 1 children were allocated to each group. The design differed from the original RCT such that both groups received intervention but the start was staggered. The intervention group received the 18 week intervention as in the original RCT and this started in the Autumn term of the school year 2014. The waiting control group in this case started the intervention in the Spring term after the intervention group had completed the first half, therefore receiving only the second 9 week of block of the intervention.

Measures

Children were assessed at the beginning of the intervention, after the first 9 week block and again after 18 weeks when both groups had received intervention. The same measures were used as described in the RCT. TAs were given two days of intensive training but were not supported by tutorials over the course of the intervention.

Findings

Treatment Effects

In order to assess treatment effects we compared the intervention and waiting control groups before the intervention and after the first 9 weeks when the waiting control group had not received intervention. At this point we only looked at scores from children in year 1 (n=7 in each group) as the school had experienced problems with the reception classroom which had delayed the beginning of the intervention. We lost one child from the waiting control group part way through the intervention bringing the control group down to n=6. Narrative Production scores were not available for this sample but all other scores are given here.
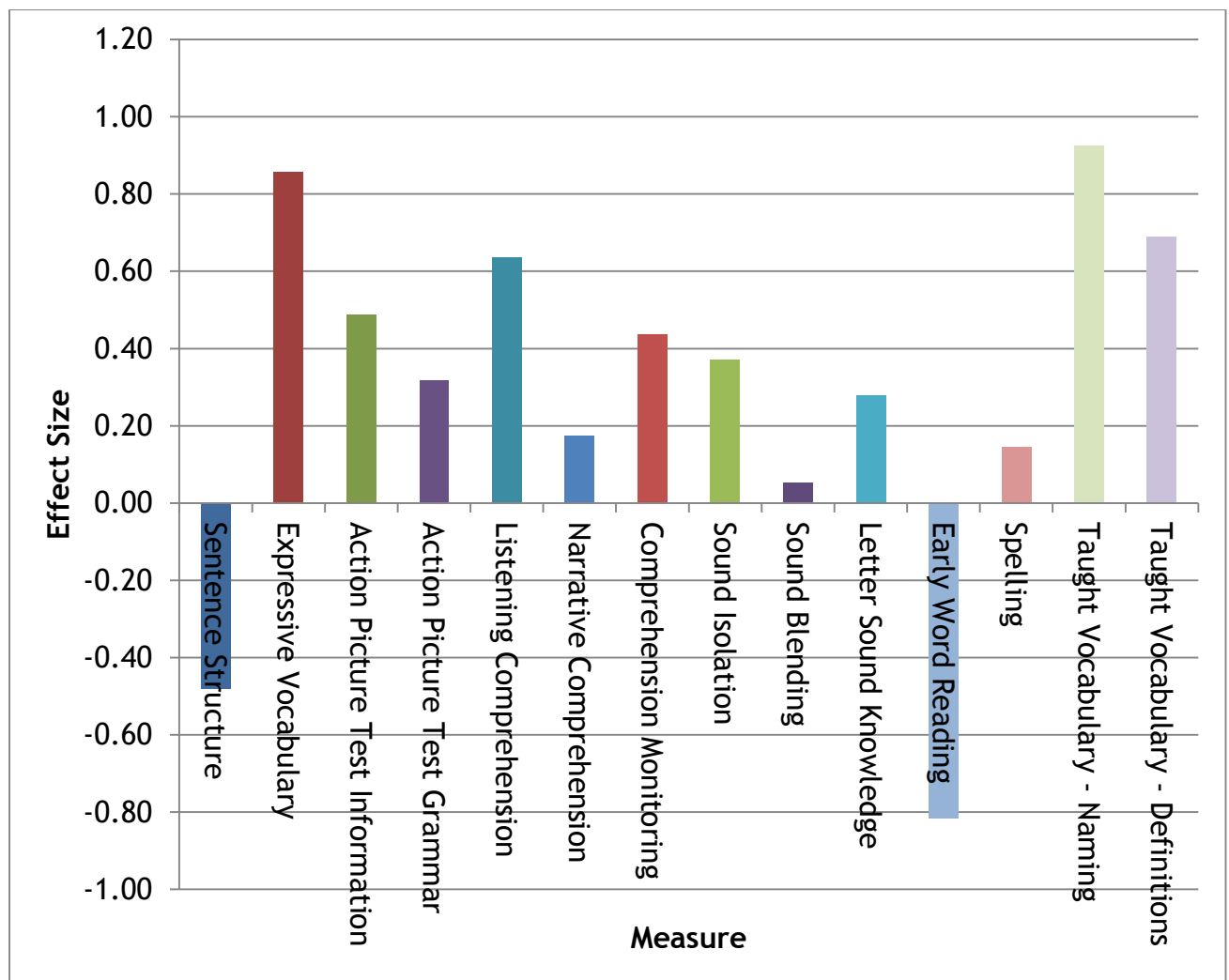

Figure 6 - Difference between intervention group and waiting control group after 9 weeks of intervention.

Looking at effect sizes in figure 6, results indicated that the intervention group were outperforming the control group on the measures of taught vocabulary and comprehension monitoring as in the original RCT. However, in this sample, listening comprehension and expressive vocabulary also appeared to have improved in the

intervention group to a greater extent than the control group. Conversely, the control group appeared to have made more progress on a measure of expressive grammar (sentence structure) and on early word reading. However the data must be interpreted with caution as it is descriptive and based on a small sample.

Teacher Feedback

We carried out a focus group with a sample of teaching assistants who took part in the programme and the EAL co-ordinators from both schools.   This enabled us to gain detailed feedback from staff regarding any challenges they faced in implementing the programme which would help to inform future programme design. Key themes were extracted from the focus group and a sample of indicative responses are given below.

Training

The staff were asked how they felt about the training and whether it was comprehensive enough. Overall the staff felt the training was useful and they were confident in delivering the programme with many respondents noting that they were already familiar with the kind of content that was involved such as phonics and language. For example:

"from the school's point of view the phonics side of it, we felt quite confident"
"Similar to what we do in class, umm especially within the grade 2, the sequencing and stuff like that"
"I actually quite enjoyed those training sessions. I found them useful"
"Yeah, very useful. Um, it kind of took us through each part of the, the book and the actual programme and it made it quite easy for me to then pass it on to staff at school"

The staff did however have some uncertainty over whether or not they were allowed to adapt the intervention to suit particular needs while remaining within the confines of the programme. If it was acceptable to make alterations, they would have appreciated some input during the training which specified methods by which they could do this, for example how to engage those who were struggling to keep up e.g.:

"It's then having the confidence to know whether or not there are changes we can make"

"the EAL children I was working with were.. they're probably one word sentences and trying to explain to them as the activities got a little bit more difficult it was hard to even get the instructions across to what the game was for them to understand"

Structure

The staff were asked about their opinions on the structure of the programme regarding its length and the mixture of individual and group sessions. They were divided on their opinions of the individual sessions. There was general agreement that the individual sessions were worthwhile because they offered features that the group sessions could not deliver, such as providing a platform for more timid children to build their confidence. For example, when considering the individual sessions staff commented:

"They were really good for some of the children who were quite shy within a group"

"I found they would get a lot more out of those children"

Yet some teaching assistants voiced concern that they struggled to fit the individual sessions into their existing schedules, e.g.:

"I couldn't fit the sessions into the timetable. I tried to do the groups regularly but I just couldn't find the slots to do the individual sessions over time"

One teacher felt the mixture of group and individual sessions were crucial to the effectiveness of the programme. When asked if the programme could be run with just group sessions, they commented:

"I don't think you could have. I think there's certain children, especially when they're learning a new language, that wouldn't have the confidence within a group that they have one to one. So I think you needed both parts, that's what we found with our children"

Other staff however felt the intervention would work just as well without the inclusion of the individual sessions for some of the more able students, e.g.:

"For the individual sessions, I didn't think they all needed individual sessions. You know so for two slots was it for a week? I think you should aim to only have the individual sessions for those that are struggling"

In terms of the length of the sessions, some, though not all, felt the individual sessions were too long, particularly for students showing particular delay in their language ability. The group sessions however, were felt to be the appropriate length to sustain pupil's engagement:

"I'd say the group session was the right amount of time"
"I'd say the length was just about right because um, the individual sessions they meant that you could actually record what the children were saying and then you could see the progression in their feedback. But uh the group ones, I observed a few of those, and the children seemed quite attentive"

The staff were asked how they felt about the prescriptive nature of the programme. One teacher felt that the prescriptive nature was not debilitating because there were ways of adapting the programme to suit individual's needs, e.g.

"I did change a few bits, but once I think you realise it is okay to…it is that knowing "is this how it's meant to be""

Content
The staff were asked their opinion on the content of the programme. The staff generally felt the topics covered were appropriate and no problems were faced with the topic choices. However, staff felt that some of the activities were too difficult for a number of students. One problem the children had was relating the vocabulary learnt in activities to real-world contexts and this led to students being disengaged from participation:
"it was more like they was learning cards rather than the actual: this is a tongue and this is in her mouth"
"The narrating was definitely too much for some of them in reception. They just didn't really understand it"
"It was just the sort of vocab and that got harder and more…it just become too much for the children I had"

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In terms of vocabulary, there were a couple of incidences where the vocabulary was perhaps a bit too unusual. The amount of vocabulary to learn however seemed to be just right.

A particular strength of the way the content was delivered was that it had a clear routine and there was opportunity to revisit previously learnt material:

"Even the having the, yeah, the routine, they knew exactly what was coming and what was next"

"Once you got into that routine, you could be organised."

Implementation

Staff were asked for their thoughts on the implementation of the programme. It was felt that the programme took a substantial amount of time to prepare and some of the staff struggled to cope with this. Perhaps the amount of resources to prepare could be reduced in future. When asked how they found the preparation time staff commented:

"Hard, hard to find the time"

"Yeah sometimes I had to do it after work, or do it over lunch. I mean the second group was a bit easier because we could use your feedback from the first group"

Although a member of staff commented that:

"the resources worked well. I'm sure they must have taken quite a bit of time to set up"

Many teaching assistants found it difficult to schedule time and space to lead the programme. This tended to be the case when they were classroom-based and there was no time allocated for them to lead interventions:

"I was on class base as well so it was harder for me to try and find a slot and a time, you know a lot of time to fit in individual sessions"

"I just couldn't find the slots to do the individual sessions over time but that's probably because I was classroom based"

"When I was initially doing it I was doing it during assembly times with my class, uh, when I was given a time slot to do it, it was just trying to find somewhere to go"

When staff were able to incorporate the programme into their schedules it seemed to run smoothly:

"Sometimes I know that the point of view that the TAs didn't have the availability but in terms of timetabling it wasn't really an issue because this school has intervention groups anyway so it was another intervention group that was happening"

"I think from a class point of view if you weren't used to that it might drive you a little but mad having children coming and going. But because we tend to, particularly in the afternoons, perhaps have certain children have certain days, and we have a code system to put in their books which shows that that child's not been absent a lot but they've missed part of that lesson due to being in an intervention"

One teacher did however report that the individual sessions were very time consuming and this limited the number of children who could partake in the programme, i.e. *"The individual sessions were probably the hardest to fit in"*

Suitability

The research team carried out a screening process to ensure the lowest performing children were included in the programme. Only children who had some level of functional English were included in the programme. The lowest ability children fell behind the other students as the vocabulary in the programme became more difficult. It was observed that these children became disengaged and simply copied their peers who could cope:

"I stopped it after about the 14th session because it was getting a bit too out of depth"

"He could understand everything I was saying but he just couldn't verbalise it back. Like you know when you're trying to get them…he would just point. And after a few sessions of doing it I think it had become…he didn't get excited about coming anymore"

"The little girl from your class she just got left behind because she just copied whatever the other one said or else just copied whatever I said. I don't think she had the understanding at all"

"We've got the other extreme where we've got another little group where one of them kicks out really quickly and then the others are just copying the other extreme"

It was thought that the programme could be extended to include students delayed in their language use who did not have English as a second language but perhaps had special educational needs:

"Would be mostly made up of children with English as an additional language but then there might be the odd sort of children who crop up...who would really have benefitted from doing that"

"There's a lot of English speaking children that, they've read on the language thing, that I know that that, now that I've done the programme and seen it, I know that that would benefit a lot of them as well"

"Using it for maybe SEN as well as EAL"

Outcomes

Staff were asked whether they felt the children had benefitted from the programme. The teachers reported seeing an improvement in many children's language skills following the intervention:

"I've seen an improvement in children"

"I've noticed the changes in talking as well. Even the one we spoke to about a lot, is now talking more now in year one. It's not affecting other areas yet. But she talks more and the others that I've said were best fitted for the programme, their talking was pretty much, in year one, instant and it's now actually having a positive effect on their reading and writing as well"

"And you could actually see in some of the things that they were saying...there's just so many, I was just reading them to the head.

"...She's still learning but she's come a long way"

The biggest impact of the programme appeared to be on the children's confidence. Both teachers in charge of leading the programme in two independent groups of children reported observing changes in the children's willingness to open up to others:

"The biggest thing is confidence"

"She's definitely started coming out of her shell"

"Even the reception class where confidence was concerned that really did help"

"Yeah the confidence. Like STAFF said the confidence has worked I think of any ability child, you know the confidence has been really, really shown, like particularly year one, they benefit."

Additionally it was suggested that the children found the intervention engaging and enjoyable:

"They really enjoyed it, especially like with the Ted…"

"The group ones, I observed a few of those, and the children seemed quite attentive"

"Yes, when I went into watch them, they were quite enthusiastic when they knew what they were doing. Because there was quite a few different resources"

Future directions

A theme that emerged from the group was one of future directions. One of the main issues raised by those who led the intervention was that the individual sessions were too long, were difficult to fit in and were not perhaps necessary for the children who started with slightly higher language skills and confidence levels. Some therefore suggested reducing the individual sessions in future:

"Of course they have to read in their own class when they go in as well and then there's times when they, so um, yeah I wondered whether there was a way of adapting it slightly. Whether it works without individual…"

It was also unanimously agreed that the programme was not appropriate for the students with the very lowest language skills. Some teaching staff proposed starting the programme later on in schooling to give the lowest performers a chance to gain more verbal experience before they begin:

"I personally feel in this school, we started them in reception too soon in here. I think that some of the reception children could have benefitted just from being in that environment which is very, in this school, very communication-friendly environment where they are encouraged to speak."

"It could be something that we look at starting something later in the year if we felt we had children who were ready for it. Urm, but I think the children as it just so happens with the year group that there is this this year that the children that were identified, I think they'd be better suited to it from September in year one"

"...and our EAL, our lowest ones, they would sit and smile at you or cry. So you can imagine trying to sit them down to run a programme like this, um, you could not choose the lowest of the low. If anything they would probably go into the, we have a class, where they go into and they learn "hello", the very simple things before I'd even think about them..."

Summary

Overall the results from the small scale research suggest that the programme may have been beneficial for the children involved. While results from the group comparison must be interpreted with caution results from our qualitative analysis suggest that TAs were positive about the programme. Moreover, their identification of shortcomings reflects our discussion of the findings from the large scale project. For example, TAs felt that the programme was not suited for children with the lowest language skills and that some of the activities were too hard. Perhaps targeting specific, basic skills would have been more appropriate. In addition, TAs had difficulty fitting the intervention into the school day and it may be the case that in a culture of growing pressure on schools, small group intervention using a combination of group and individual sessions, and run with this level of intensity is not possible. However, TAs clearly saw benefit in the programme, particularly in terms of building confidence.

Overall Summary and Implications

This report describes the evaluation of an oral language intervention for children learning EAL and monolingual English speaking children with language weaknesses. Results from the RCT indicate that the programme was successful in teaching new vocabulary. Effect sizes also indicate that the programme supported the development of comprehension monitoring skills although we failed to find to statistically significant differences between groups on this and other language measures. In addition, results from a small scale feasibility study suggest improvements on a range of language measures and feedback from staff was generally positive. The results of this study were not as encouraging as our previous intervention work. Feedback from TAs in a feasibility study indicated that the programme was well received by the children, the vocabulary was largely appropriate and the structure useful, but the time commitment was difficult to

accommodate in a busy school setting. In addition, the programme may have been too difficult for many of the children selected whose language skills were very low in comparison to their peers. This feedback was reflected in our discussion of the RCT findings.

Overall, the findings of this report indicate that small group and individual "pull-out" interventions are becoming increasingly difficult to deliver in schools by existing staff. Alternative models employing volunteers and parents may need to be explored. Moreover, it is vital to employ careful selection procedures to ensure that children are receiving the most appropriate intervention. On a positive note, the lack of treatment effects may also indicate an increased awareness of the importance of language in the classroom, leading to language rich environments for all children, not just the children receiving intervention. Nevertheless, it remains the case that children learning EAL struggle compared to their monolingual peers and more research is needed investigating effective means of support for this group.

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Appendix – Overview of tests used

Construct	Source*	Subtest	Author(s)*	t0/1	t3	t4
Nonverbal IQ	Wechsler Pre-school & Primary Scale of Intelligence (WPPSI II[UK])	Block Design	Wechsler (2003)	x		
Phonological Awareness	York Assessment of Reading for Comprehension – Early Reading	Sound Isolation	Hulme et al., 2009	x	x	x
	-	Sound Blending		x	x	x
	York Assessment of Reading for Comprehension - Early Reading	Sound Deletion	Hulme et al., 2009			x
Vocabulary	Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals Preschool 2[UK]	Expressive Vocabulary	Semel, Wiig, & Secord, 2006	x	x	x
	Action Picture Test	Information	Renfrew, 2003	x	x	x
	-	Taught Vocabulary – Naming		x	x	x
	-	Taught Vocabulary - Definitions		x	x	x
Grammar	Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals UK**	Sentence Structure	Semel, Wiig, & Secord, 2006	x	x	
	Action Picture Test	Grammar	Renfrew, 2003	x	x	x
Listening Comprehension		Listening Comprehension		x	x	x
Nonword Repetition	Early Repetition Battery	Nonword repetition	Seeff-Gabriel, Chiat, & Roy, 2008	x		
Narrative Skills	-	Narrative Production		x	x	x
	-	Narrative Comprehension		x	x	x
	-	Comprehension Monitoring		x	x	x
Word Reading	York Assessment of Reading for Comprehension – Early Reading	Early Word Recognition	Hulme et al., 2009	x	x	
Reading Comprehension	York Assessment of Reading for Comprehension – Passage Reading	Passage Reading	Snowling et al., 2009			x
Spelling	-	Invented Spelling				x
Letter Sound Knowledge	York Assessment of Reading for Comprehension – Early Reading	Letter Sound Knowledge	Hulme et al., 2009	x	x	x
	-	Taught Letter Sounds			x	x

* authors are provided for published tests. Further details of the additional tests designed for the project can be requested from the authors of this report.