

Secondary school is not too late to support and enhance language and communication...

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“Secondary schools have been ignored for a long time.

There is very little outside help for students with language problems. You really have to have huge problems, be at the very bottom, to get any help at all, and even then it is very little”

These are the words of a secondary school Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo). They express the concerns of many teachers, speech and language therapists and parents, and reflect the limited specialist support available for students in secondary school with speech, language and communication difficulties (SLCD). This is reinforced by the Bercow Review which reported in 2008 how “services tended to ‘disappear’ over time, especially...on transfer to secondary school. Indeed we found minimal evidence of services for young people at secondary school and beyond.” (p. 37).

From this, one might assume that studies have shown that SLCD ameliorate as children get older and enter secondary school. One would be mistaken. In fact, Bercow goes on to report how this reduction in specialist services in secondary school has “little evidence” to support it, and does not appear to be based on “a rigorous needs assessment” (p. 37). Moreover, the evidence that is available suggests the very opposite, that is, that a “significant proportion of children and young people in...secondary school with special educational needs have SLCN (speech, language and communication needs) as their primary need” (Bercow, 2008, p. 13). Furthermore, a number of longitudinal research studies following up children with SLCD into adolescence and adulthood report similar findings: early SLCD do not necessarily disappear once a child reaches secondary school, and these difficulties can be pervasive and continue into adolescence and adulthood, impacting not only on the young person’s educational attainment, but also on their quality of life and life choices and opportunities (Johnson et al., 2010;

Snowling et al., 2001; Snowling et al., 2006; Wadman et al., in press).

Aims

The ELCISS (Enhancing Language and Communication in Secondary Schools) Research Programme, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, was initiated to address this gap and explore ways of supporting older children and young people with SLCD. The programme had three main objectives:

- Describe the language and communication skills of secondary school students identified as having poor language and communication
- Develop the language abilities of secondary school students with SLCD, with a specific focus on storytelling skills and vocabulary enrichment
- Enhance the awareness of teaching and support staff in speech, language and communication, SLCD and classroom strategies to support and facilitate language and learning

Project description

Twenty-one secondary schools from two outer London boroughs participated in the programme. Teachers were asked to refer students who obtained low average or below average in their English school examination in Y6. Once these referrals were made, the ELCISS research team administered a range of verbal and non-verbal assessments to explore the nature of the language difficulties that the students were experiencing. The students were then randomly assigned to four different intervention groups:

- Storytelling Intervention Group
- Vocabulary Enrichment Intervention Group
- Combined Storytelling and Vocabulary Enrichment Group
- Control Intervention Group – obtained one of the interventions at a later time and acted as the control group

Storytelling and Vocabulary enrichment were chosen as the two key areas of intervention as they are fundamental skills required at some level across, not only every curriculum subject, but are also essential to everyday life. We are continually faced with words, concepts and their meanings, and an understanding of them, and ability to independently interpret the meaning of new words is an important prerequisite in engaging and managing day to day events. Similarly, storytelling, and the ability to share and listen to experiences, is not only enjoyable, but can be viewed as a vital life skill.

The students received one of the three intervention programmes over a six-week period for a total of 18 lessons. The intervention was delivered in school by trained teaching assistants (TA). The storytelling programme facilitated an awareness of constructing and telling stories and focused both on story structure and story delivery. Emphasis was also placed on the importance of being a good listener. The Vocabulary intervention emphasised the importance of word knowledge, created an awareness of word etymology and parts of speech, as well as encouraged students to adopt a range of independent word learning strategies. The combined group received aspects of both programmes within the same time frame.

At the end of the intervention, a comprehensive whole-school training programme, co-funded by The Communication Trust, was developed to support teachers and support staff in enhancing the language and communication of the students.

Profiling the students’ language skills

There were approximately 360 12-year old students, from the 21 secondary schools, who were identified as having language and communication difficulties. Only around 3% of this group had a statement of special educational needs and less than 20%

of them were known to the primary or secondary speech and language therapy services. These children appeared mostly to be students not receiving any specialist support, students not necessarily with “huge problems”, students not at “the very bottom”, but students nevertheless experiencing difficulties accessing the curriculum and students presenting with varied difficulties on a range of standardised language tests.

As a group, the students did not present with significant non-verbal difficulties. The difficulties they experienced were in the verbal domain, and their key linguistic problems were in expressing language. They showed difficulties with vocabulary, and with putting words together to make grammatical sentences. An area that was also hard for them was understanding idiomatic language. As a group, the students had problems understanding multiple meanings (e.g. recognising the meanings for the word “letter” or “bark”), idioms and other figurative language. Many will recognise the confusion in the classroom faced by some students when told for example, that a character they are reading about is “the black sheep of the family”!

Outcomes and points of interest

Our initial findings suggest that both language interventions were effective at improving the students’ language skills. Results from a range of non-standardised vocabulary and storytelling tasks show significant differential improvement by the students in areas of language targeted by the interventions. For example, students involved in the **vocabulary enrichment** intervention scored higher after the intervention on measures of **vocabulary** than students in the control group who did not receive any intervention. Improvement was noted in both the understanding and expression of vocabulary as well as with idiomatic understanding. This improvement in vocabulary was not evident with the students who were given the storytelling intervention, who showed no difference in vocabulary knowledge after intervention compared with the control group.

The same pattern was observed with storytelling skills. Students who participated in the **storytelling intervention** performed better on

storytelling tasks than the control group at post intervention, a finding not evident with the students attending the vocabulary group. Interestingly, the children who received the combined training scored better than the control group on both vocabulary and storytelling.

These findings suggest that the interventions were effective at enhancing the language and communication of secondary school students with SLCD.

Feedback from the students, teaching assistants and school staff provide further support for the benefits of the ELCISS Programme. These reported benefits include increase in **language ability** (‘I really liked the story telling best, it helps me with my talking and I hope we are going to do it again’ and ‘It helped me to bring out my language properly and I enjoyed it too’ – two students on the programme), **self esteem** and **social skills** (‘I felt confident and started socialising more’; ‘Didn’t have to worry about getting something wrong’, ‘Working in a team’; ‘helping me understand people’ – four students on the programme).

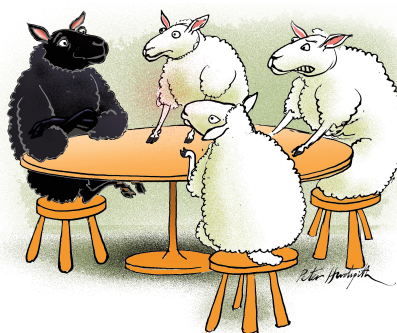


Illustration: Peter Hudspith

Impact of the Programme

At the start of the programme, the teaching assistants showed limited and variable understanding of speech, language and communication as well as of SLCD. The training has resulted in an increased awareness of speech, language and communication and in methods and strategies to support students with SLCD in the classroom. This increase in knowledge and awareness is evident from pre and post training questionnaires, as well as from observations of the TAs delivering the intervention programmes. TAs and school staff have identified the benefits of the ELCISS Programme which include raising whole school awareness of language and communication,

enhancing the language and communication skills of the students as well as raising their learning and educational attainments.

The impact of the Programme has been noted by teaching staff across the participating secondary schools and by senior management from the local authorities. An SEN adviser of one local authority observed:

“The impact of ELCISS has been far reaching with large numbers of TA’s trained to deliver SLT programmes. There will be a huge knock on effect for us as the confidence of our TA’s has increased to such an extent that we will be able to develop their skills of delivery even further and pass their knowledge and experience onto other members of staff. It has raised the profile of SLCNs in schools not only with the TA’s but also with whole school staff, which will have an effect on the perception of SLCNs as a whole school issue”.

Future developments

We are continuing to train mainstream school staff in order to build capacity within the schools and individualise the training to meet the needs of each school. To date, we have feedback from 548 teachers: 70% of teachers reported the training to be beneficial; 68% stated they would change their teaching practises as a result of the training; and 55% requested more training in the area of language and communication. Specific examples of changes made include taking more time to explain basic classroom vocabulary, repeating instructions, pausing more frequently between instructions, encouraging more pupil talk and participation, ensuring understanding, using visual aids, getting clarification and looking more deeply into poor behaviour.

An aspect of the whole school training we have adopted also includes working with smaller staff groups within schools on specific goals, for example, differentiating homework. Individual work is also being undertaken with key teaching staff and support and advice given through classroom observations. The ELCISS Programme is now being trialled across other local authorities, and a new ELCISS Programme is being devised targeting social and life skills.

There is still much to do in the area of older children and young people with SLCN, but our results from the

Programme do suggest that the language of older children with SLCN can be enhanced through working in the classroom. Secondary school is certainly not too late to enhance language and communication.

Further Information

The storytelling, vocabulary and enrichment programmes will be published by Speechmark in February 2011.

For more information about ELCISS, please contact Victoria Joffe at vjoffe@city.ac.uk or visit www.elciss.com

The RCSLT special interest group on older children and young people with SLCN is open to anyone working with or who has an interest in SLCD. Contact: Victoria Joffe.

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