

Sustained Impact: The World's Best-Evidenced Oral Language Intervention

Maggie Snowling and Josh Hillman discuss the impact and importance of the Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI) programme.

Q: What was the context in which NELI was developed?

Maggie: The team's background is in research on reading, but about 20 years ago we started to investigate language intervention as a way of supporting the development of children who weren't responding well to our reading interventions because of underlying language difficulties. At around the same time, we started a longitudinal study to follow children aged from 3.5 to 9 years old who were at family risk of dyslexia.

Our longitudinal findings changed our views about the causes of reading difficulties. For a long time, the view had been that difficulties with reading were caused by phonological processing problems, therefore a structured phonics intervention was the answer. What was new about our research was that we were investigating the earlier causes of those phonological difficulties. By starting as early as age 3.5, rather than when children started school, we were able to track that the language difficulties caused the phonological difficulties, which in turn caused the reading difficulties. This isn't the only route to dyslexia, but we found that 45% of dyslexia cases in children were associated with oral language difficulties – even for children who were not at family risk of dyslexia – and so language interventions would support their literacy development.

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We spent the next 15 years developing and refining the intervention. We provided schools with a language intervention kit with toys and resources, as well as training and ongoing support for teaching assistants (TAs).

Q: What changes have you seen since NELI was first developed?

Josh: When the pandemic hit, the Department for Education (DfE) was concerned about widening attainment gaps, and wanted an evidence-based early intervention programme that could be quickly deployed. For the first year, the rollout was managed by the EEF in partnership with the DfE; then Nuffield took over in the second year, managing a DfE grant to deliver the programme to a larger number of schools.

Maggie: We had to adapt our training model and move it online using the FutureLearn platform. We also changed our screening from paper-based to an app, LanguageScreen, with three sub-tests: expressive and receptive vocabulary, comprehension, and sentence repetition (a measure of grammar). The intervention has stayed broadly the same: there's lots of interest in digital products, but the key for NELI is the relationships children build with teachers and TAs through doing things in person.

With more schools adopting the intervention, we also had to consider how to support delivery of NELI. We appointed a customer success team which engaged with schools and was available to deal with a wide variety of queries from technical to pedagogical. We have also developed a 'dashboard' system which schools can use to view the programme data from their class and to monitor the progress of individual children. The data from schools then gives us insights into how NELI works in real world settings.

Q: What have been the challenges with implementing NELI in schools?

Maggie: The most important challenge has been resource constraints. Although NELI is free to use, schools have to plan how to allocate their TA resource to allow them to deliver the intervention. Then, when TAs move on, there's a need to retrain another person in the school to deliver NELI. In order to ensure the

sustainability of the programme, and its fidelity, our team began to run webinars and built a community of practice to help users to network and share advice.

We're required by the DfE to contact all schools in England to find out whether they're using NELI, and we have a large customer engagement team to do that. In line with recent SEND reforms set out to train more speech and language therapists to support schools, we'd like to engage more with them. Currently, the profession can be hard to reach, not least because they are typically funded by the NHS and not by schools.

Josh: One of the earlier challenges of scaling up the programme was that policymakers and the education sector had not yet recognised the importance of oral language development. At the time, there was significant focus on phonics among commercial providers, driven by policy priorities and overlooking the foundational role of oral language. Among some, there was a view that teaching children to speak and listen was the role of the home, not the school.

Maggie: What can really help is a senior leader in a local authority (LA) who believes in the NELI intervention. In South Lanarkshire, there was a fantastic headteacher who was seconded to the LA. He had read about NELI, got in touch with us, and convinced the LA to deliver NELI in 86 schools. His influence convinced them to try it, despite objections. LAs should be choosing evidence-based programmes, but not everyone does; sometimes you need the influence of a senior leader who believes in your work.

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Q: What's next for NELI?

Maggie: We are hoping that the use of NELI, which is already endorsed by the DfE, might become mandated; we're confident that Labour believe in it as a force for equity in education. NELI already supports EAL children, children on free school meals, and children who come to school with low language levels for a variety of reasons. And potentially with SEND reforms, it could support more children with language-related difficulties and other diagnoses. We also know that it helps to improve behaviour. As part of the intervention, groups of children need to sit down, listen, look at each other, be quiet – all aspects which improve self regulation, which

could reduce the number of ADHD diagnoses.

Most educational interventions and their effects fade out over time. But for NELI, our recent two-year follow-up, which is some of the only data in the field, showed that the effects were sustained. The effect on children's language continued, and was significantly ahead of children who had not received NELI¹.

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Josh: The preschool version of NELI is currently being scaled up and evaluated by the EEF, addressing the need to support children with poor oral language skills well before they enter Reception classes. However, the early years environment is even more fragmented and complex than primary schools, and it's challenging for settings to carve out the significant time and resource needed for such an intensive programme.

As a research funder, the Nuffield Foundation is interested in replicating the success of NELI in other areas like early numeracy and social and emotional skills, aiming to tackle the significant gaps between children from different backgrounds early in the educational system.

Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI) is a classroom-based oral language intervention programme, currently in use in approximately two-thirds of primary schools in England.

Professor Maggie Snowling is a psychologist and world-leading expert in language difficulties, including dyslexia. Maggie, with Professor Charles Hulme, led the development of NELI at the Universities of York and Oxford.



Josh Hillman is Director of Education at the Nuffield Foundation and has been involved in supporting the development and roll-out of NELI.



1 Hulme, C. et al., 'The Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI) programme is associated with lasting improvements in children's language and reading skills'. (2025), *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 66, pp. 1357–1365.