CASE STUDY REPORT

The missing piece of the jigsaw: 'Let's interact' Learning to Talk, Talking to Learn

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This study was originally published in 2010 as part of the 'What Works Well' initiative, part of the National Strategies for Education in England.

Abstract

Background: The purpose of the study was to improve the communication, language, and literacy skills of young learners in three different settings through the use of CPD approaches such as Owling, the Four 'S's, Listening Groups, and Narrative Groups. The strategies used led to a more pupil-led curriculum, increased individual vocabulary, and improved focus and concentration during small group teaching sessions. This was reflected in the increase in children's FSP scores and NC assessment results.

Aims: The main aim of the project was to provide a clear pathway to support pupils who are working below expected developmental norms in CLL, using practical strategies to improve their learning in a positive way.

Methods: The participants included teachers, support staff, headteachers, LA advisers, parents, and the senior leadership team. They worked together to implement the 'Owling' strategy, Listening groups, and Narrative approach to improve pupils' communication, language, and literacy skills, as well as their personal, social, and emotional development. This had a significant impact on pupil learning, with an increase in the number of children transferring into Foundation 2 at Point 4 or above on the Profile in Language for Communication and Thinking, and an increase in FSP scores at both the end of F1 and F2. In Key Stage 1, the Narrative approach has impacted the last two years' NC assessment results, with more children achieving level 3s and 2c. The methods used included 'Owling' techniques, Listening Groups, Narrative approach, British Picture Vocabulary scale, Foundation Stage Profile, Assessment for Learning, and Rhyme time. These were used to support individual children in 'Learning to Talk and Talking to Learn'.

Findings: The project provided a pathway to support pupils below expected developmental norms in CLL, with evidence showing a significant number of pupils working within expected age related levels in PSME and Language for Communication and Thinking. Teachers and TAs developed a different approach to teaching and pupils' learning, with the project becoming a whole school initiative. The support of the headteacher and Senior management team was crucial to the success of the project.

Implications: The findings of the project suggest that using strategies such as 'Owling', Listening Groups, and Narrative approach can have a positive impact on pupil learning, teaching, and school organisation and leadership. These strategies empower adults to teach in a positive way, looking at individual child's

understanding and linguistic development, and can help raise progress and learning to expected levels.

This abstract was generated by Camtree using a large language model (LLM) and added to the original report in 2023.

Introduction

What were your reasons for doing this type of development work?

When approached by my LA to be a F1 leading teacher and be a part of the "Let's interact" Learning to Talk, Talking to Learn project I saw this as a really fantastic CPD opportunity. It meant I would be able to improve my understanding of how to support young learners in my own setting who on entry to Nursery were scoring very low on the Foundation Stage Profile (FSP). These levels of attainment were also reinforced by the introduction of the EYFS. The data I had collected showed that about 90% of our children after three terms in Nursery in the Linking Sounds and Letters strand of Communication, Language and Literacy (CLL) were still working at the 22 to 36 months stage and about 10% of the children were working at 16 to 24 months on the EYFS "ages and stages". This project required me to work with other adults in settings where children were scoring the lowest points on the FSP within a prescribed geographical education area of our Local Authority. I was keen to be a part of this project as I would not only receive training as a coach and mentor but also training in the Hanen Centre's 'Learning Language and Loving It: A Guide to Promoting Children's Social and Language Development in Early Childhood Settings'. This is an approach based on research into developmental ways to promote children's literacy, language and social development. I would also be trained in how to run Listening Groups as developed by a group of Nottinghamshire speech therapists and the Nursery narrative approach based on the work of Judith Carey, Helen Broughton and Becky Shanks in collaboration with Helen Rippon, published by Black Sheep Press.

This project was a joint venture between Speech Therapists from the Health Authority and the Early Years section of the LA Advisory and Inspection Service, and provided a really opportunity to be involved in inter-agency liaison and networking.

Who might find this case study useful?

- Support staff
- Headteacher
- LA adviser
- Parent
- Senior leadership team (SLT)
- Teacher

Description

What specific curriculum area, subject or aspect did you intend to have impact on?

- Communication, language and literacy
- Personal, social and emotional development

How did you intend to impact on pupil learning?

- To improve our pupils' ability to communicate and develop their language skills.
- To develop children's phonological awareness to support their acquisition of reading and writing skills and to prepare them thoroughly to be successful when exploring elements of 'Letters and Sounds'.
- To establish Listening groups where listening and attention strategies were modelled by adults in an enjoyable and fun way that motivate young learners to listen, focus and attend by using these skills.
- To establish Narrative groups where pupils are again supported by adult modelling to develop the understanding of the structure of story narrative e.g Who, What, Where and When and can use these in planning. preparing and composing narratives themselves. The involvement of parents/carers in this project so that they had an understanding of activities and ideas which would support their children's

learning in Communication, Language and Literacy.

• To work with parents and carers with children between two and three years who would be joining our setting during the next academic year providing information and enjoyable activities to use with their children to support development in language for communication and rhyming and alliteration.

What were your success criteria?

For pupils :-

• accelerated progress in all areas of CLL but with particular emphasis on Linking Sounds and Letters. Also in PSE, Disposition and Attitudes, Self esteem and forming meaningful relationships. Evidenced by Attention Levels tracker sheet. (Cooper, Moodley and Reynell)

• Improved receptive vocabulary, evidenced by increased scores on the British Picture Vocabulary Scale. 'The British Picture Vocabulary Scales' by Lloyd M Dunn, Douglas M Dunn, Ben Styles & Julie Sewell Published by NFER.

For adults :-

• Improved adult interaction when supporting self initiated learning.

• Improved ability to reflect on own practice both evidenced by on going observations, target setting from video analysis and adult learning journey logs. • Improved use of observation to inform next steps in learning for pupils, evidenced by teacher planning and finally improved reflection on the organisation and management of the learning environment, evidenced by the frequency of listening and narrative groups at relevant points in the project.

What information or data did you use to measure progress towards your success criteria?

• Logs or interviews
• Observation outcomes
• Periodic teacher assessment
• Test results

Describe the CPD approaches you used

This project lasted for two years and I received training first for myself and then worked subsequently with two other schools.Initially we met as a group of lead teachers who were to receive training in the Hanen approach to Speech and Language. This training also included the background to the 'Let's interact' Learning to Talk, Talking to Learn project with advice on using successful strategies and approaches in peer coaching and mentoring with adults. The Speech Therapist and the Early Years teacher from the LA spearheaded the project leading four different training sessions.

Session 1

We were asked to bring along to this session a video clip of about 3 minutes of us as teachers working with a group of children at Child Self-initiated Time. We were given a video analysis sheet with five boxes on it. Each had a different strategy to be recorded when that strategy was observed on the video clip. As we watched the video we recorded a tally mark in each box to record the number of times we had used that strategy. The headings were as follows :- When we had waited for a response from a child, when we had asked a question, when we had made a suggestion/directed a child, when we had copied or followed a child's lead and finally when we had commented on something a child had done. Ideally there should be a balance between all five headings. As teachers, most of the group were asking way too many questions and not waiting for the children to respond

or speak before asking more and more questions.

Sessions then followed focusimng on Owling, the Four 'S's, Listening groups and Narrative groups.

1) It was important for our own professional development as adults to be able to 'Owl' with our children: Observing, waiting and listening. (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2002; The Hanen Centre 2008). These were the key elements for us to use as practitioners to help encourage our children to feel confident to talk. We needed to use our children's talk to follow their interests and for us to understand each child's individual level of development. Then identify the learning objectives and opportunities we needed to provide as practitioners to further enhance this learning.

As practitioners in my setting we made video clips of each of us interacting with children at Child Self-initated Time. We analysed these and used the information to set targets to develop our 'Owling' skills. We then needed to re-video to assess our progress.

2) The second training session looked at what practitioners should expect as "normal language development" and the stages this involved. We then considered the causes of speech delay, specific speech and language delay, general delay and environmental delay. As we became more confident and skilled we realised we needed to now use the 4 "s "and considered how as practitioners we could use them to improve our approach and ability to respond to each child's individual level of development. We used planning and team meetings to review and discuss how we were feeling and to share successes and concerns to support each other on our journey.

Running alongside this were my visits and meetings with the practitioner I was mentoring in their setting.Supply cover for this was a part of the project and it provided essential quality time for us to meet as practitioners to evaluate progress, swap ideas and share ways to further develop the training we had received.

3) Listening Groups The third training session involved the setting up and development of Listening groups working with young children to effect a change in their speech, language and listening skills. This training also ensured that we as practitioners gained the skills to develop children's language skills to their full potential through the use of this method. After the third training session I returned to school and began to set up and develop Listening groups. This training would ensure that we as practitioners gained the skills to develop children's language skills to their full potential through the use of the resources and strategies contained in the Listening groups pack.

It was at this point in the project that we met what seemed to us a real stumbling block. To put it simply we began the groups and when we came together to review their progress we all individually admitted that our children just didn't seem interested in the sessions we were leading. The children were just not engaging or really enjoying the listening activities.

As we explored and worried over what seemed like our failure with the Listening packs I made one of my pre-arranged visits to the school I was working with. I mentioned our concerns to learn that they had similar problems. They had overcome them by using toy mice and a big cuddly cat. Each child had a mouse on a piece of ribbon and as the listening session evolved had to listen really well to make sure the hungry cat didn't catch their mouse. They had also simplified the amount of activities they introduced in a week and added more opportunities for the children to repeat and consolidate the different games and activities.

The next lunch time found two of our team in the local pet shop where we bought up all the toy mice. We also reduced the number of new games we introduced in a week.This simple but invaluable sharing of good practice transformed these groups and at the next training session we all shared this. This is one simple example of the sharing of good practice which came to symbolise for me the real power of the whole 'Let's Interact' project.

4) Narrative Groups. The fourth training session focused on the use of Narrative Groups. Again after this session I

returned to my setting and we began using Narrative groups in Foundation 2 year (F2). We found the 'Nursery Narrative' manual so important a professional development tool that we purchased extra copies and had several staff meetings to initiated the approach into Key Stage 1.

Running throughout the training for these sessions were also strategies to develop not only my role in my school but to work alongside other practitioners as their mentor as they responded to the 'Let's Interact' training and began to use it with other adults and children in their individual settings.

Coaching and mentoring skills were used from the National Framework for Mentoring and Coaching. On returning to my setting after each training session I cascaded the training to other staff and we considered and discussed how best to maximise the impact in the context of our school. A part of my role for this project was to develop the 'Let's Interact' strategies in my own setting so that I could then work as a mentor in other settings with practitioners who were also receiving this training and using it as a CPD opportunity. After each of the practitioners' training sessions, I arranged a visit to their setting to discuss, evaluate and support their own development as a part of the project.

For myself personally, this aspect was the most exciting and important part of my role and a crucial professional development experience. Having quality time to work alongside other professionals meant not only did I use my training to enhance the learning of the children in my setting but I also could share other practitioners' enthusiasm, hard work and best of all their great ideas. I then shared these with my own team on returning to school. I also feel that the experiences I gained in mentoring and coaching supported my role as Foundation Stage manager with my own team.

This sharing of ideas and supporting other colleagues also took place during training sessions and the review days that took place at key intervals during the project. We all met as a large group and Senior leaders and head teachers from each school were also invited. These sessions celebrated success but more importantly provided networking links and opportunities that maximised the sharing of good practice and professional development opportunities.

What CPD materials, research or expertise have you drawn on?

Mentoring and Coaching CPD Capacity Building Project. National Framework for Mentoring and Coaching. Centre for the Use of Research and Care Evidence in Education (CUVEE).

"Learning Language and Loving It : A Guide to Promoting Children's Social and Language Development In Early Childhood Settings" (Weitzman & Greenberg (2002). The Hanen Centre (2008).

Listening Group Packs Produced by Emily Bruce, Sue Heaven, Heather Jenkins. Speech and Language Therapy Nottinghamshire County NHS Primary Care Trust.

Nursery Narrative 2nd Edition Nursery Narrative Helen Rippon, Stockport PCT & Stockport MBC Black Sheep Press 2007.

EYFS with specific reference to Communication for Thinking and Talking

Expertise and support from the Advisory Team and the Speech Therapy department.

Learning to Talk, Talking to Learn

The British Picture Vocabulary Scales by Lloyd M Dunn, Douglas M Dunn, Ben Styles & Julie Sewell Published by NFER

Who provided you with support?

- External agency
- Senior management

How were you supported?

I was supported in this role in a variety of ways. By all of the adults in my own school and by the adults in the 2 host schools that I worked in.

I worked for the first year in a Primary school within my own education area in a similar catchment to mine and during the second year I worked in a Primary school in a different area with a very contrasting catchment and.Throughout my visits and contact with the two host schools I was humbled and amazed at the willingness of the adults involved to give 200% to the project and to improve their own skills and practice and 'move mountains' to improve the experiences and learning opportunities for the children in their care. After each visit I would leave both schools 'buzzing' having experienced the sharing of good practice and having gained many new ideas that I wanted to try on return to my own setting.The support from my own head teacher and the headteachers in the other schools were crucial and pivotal to the success of the project and ultimately to the quality of the learning experiences of all the children involved.Similarly the enthusiasm of colleagues who were not directly involved in the training but who also wanted to support was also ever present and highly motivating.

The two adults who led our training also gave so much more then just deliver the content. Sue Heaven, the Speech Therapist, and Jane Cartledge, the Local Authority advisory teacher, were an inspiration and and set high expectations for all children's learning and progress. 'Every child really did matter' and this training provided essential tools all practitioners need to achieve this.

The LA advisory and inspection service in the persons of the Early years Inspector and the Primary Strategy Inspector for Literacy were also visionary in the conception and maintenance of this project.

Impact

What has been the overall impact on pupil learning?

The 'Owling' strategy in all 3 schools led to a more pupil-led curriculum. Adults followed the pupils' interests and lead using the vocabulary that pupils were already confident to use and extended and increased this vocabulary on an individual basis. This was relevant to each pupils' level of attainment and ensured that the strategies used extended this level as each pupil progressed at their own individual rate of achievement.

At the end of Foundation 1 year our results showed that there had been a significant increase in the number of children who transferred into Foundation 2 at Point 4 or above on the Profile in Language for Communication and Thinking.

The Listening groups impacted on pupils' ability to focus and concentrate accurately during small group teaching sessions. This has had the greatest impact on their ability to successfully and confidently access Letters and Sounds at Phase 1. This was been reflected in the increase in children's FSP scores at both the end of F1 and F2.

The Narrative approach has impacted in Key Stage 1 on the last two years' NC assessment results where in writing more children have achieved level 3s and also more children achieved 2c and above.

Thoughts you think are relevant to overall impact on learning

This project provides a clear pathway to support pupils who are working below expected developmental norms in CLL. It gives adults very practical strategies to improve children's learning in a very positive way. Through observation and using Assessment for Learning, adults can work in a 'can do' culture using children's levels of attainment to quickly and accurately interact with them in the full range of learning situations to maximise opportunities to raise attainment and ensure they become confident, motivated learners.

For children who may not seem ready for some aspects of Letters and Sounds, it gives a clear pathway for a individual learning plan that enables them to access it successfully and competently.

The Narrative approach also impacts on many children's ability to understand story and narrative as an essential tool to writing.

Quotes you think are relevant to overall impact on learning

"This project 'put me in the picture'. "

"Its the missing piece in the jigsaw."

"Now I am really scaffolding children's learning using pupil voice."

"The Senior Leadership want it to be implemented in key Stage 2 now."

"I'm commenting now rather than directing e.g. I'm not telling the children what to do."

"I now feel I can use my full range of skills during Child Initiated time."

Quantitative evidence of impact on pupil learning

- Periodic teacher assessment

Qualitative evidence of impact on pupil learning

- Logs or interviews
- Observation outcomes

Describe the evidence of impact on pupil learning

The British Picture Vocabulary scale was used to plot pupils' understanding on entry to Nursery, entry to F2 and at the end of F2. At each point in the project where evidence was analysed the scale clearly showed that a significant number of pupils who entered Nursery below expected normals in comprehension of language were by the end of the project working well within expected norms.

The Foundation Stage Profile also showed that a significant number of pupils who were below expected levels on entry by the end of the project were working within expected age related levels in PSME and Language for Communication and Thinking.

What has been the impact on teaching?

Teachers and TAs involved in the 'Let's interact' project have developed a very different approach to their teaching and pupils' learning.

The approach empowers adults to teach in a very positive way looking carefully at what each individual child understands and their levels of linguistic development. This is used as a successful method to further progress already attained and as a tool to improve learning through an approach to teaching that is very proactive. The

impact is very strong because adults are teaching from exactly where children are presently at in their learning using a very individual approach to meet every child's needs raising progress and learning to expected developmental levels and expectations.

Quotes you think are relevant to the impact on teaching

"It's the missing piece of the jigsaw, I've been waiting thirty years for this."

"I'm commenting now rather than directing e.g. I'm not telling the children what to do."

"I now feel I can use my full range of skills during Child Initiated time."

"As a team we have taken our teaching to bits and then put it back together again."

"This project has impacted on the nursery environment, our planning and our curriculum delivery."

"I am transferring these strategies to other areas, children and activities, it's impacting on all of my teaching."

Evidence of impact on teaching

- Evidence from observation and monitoring
- Evidence from planning
- Teacher perceptions

Describe the evidence of impact on teaching

Planning indicated the impact on teaching. In my own school and the two project schools planning centred around the 'Let's Interact' approach evidenced in timetabling for 'Owling' time " and also the planning and timetabling for the Listening and Narrative groups.

The adults' logs also showed the impact on teaching this project had:"This has enabled me to transfer teaching strategies right across the curriculum, across groups of learners, activities and resources."

"I feel that at last AfL is integral to my teaching, I am observing and listening so much more accurately in response to the child's interests."

"The video analysis is so reassuring and is helping to reflect on my teaching and practice which in turn impacts on my ability to improve."

What has been the impact on school organisation and leadership?

Throughout the project as I attended training, on returning to school I led INSET and staff meetings to cascade each session to our whole school team. As a member of our Senior Leadership team I also highlighted relevant details at our weekly meetings. The project took on the status of a whole school initiative and the head teacher used a section of the School development plan to ensure maximum impact of the project throughout the school and nursery.

In one of the other schools I supported the coordinator who attended the training adapted a similar approach and the Head teacher also used the School development plan to support the project.

Evidence of impact on school organisation and leadership

The second school I worked with in the project was a very large Primary and on my last visit the headteacher was in the process of spearheading the project into Key Stage 2 because it had impacted so much in Foundation and Key Stage 1.

Three years since we began this project, the impact is such that it has become sustainable and is very much a

part of our daily teaching and learning. We are now re-launching the project for new staff and training has also been extended to the Children's Centre on our site.

Summary

What is the crucial thing that made the difference?

The support of the headteacher and the Senior management team in all three schools ensured that the projects were successful.

This support meant that the projects had high status as areas for development across the schools and as such were made integral to each schools development planning. This led to resourcing such as Teacher Assistant hours, equipment and funding being placed at the disposal of the staff involved.

Another crucial factor in the success of these projects and ultimately the improvement in pupils learning was the staffs commitment to raising standards and supporting progress through self-reflection in response to the ideas and strategies they had experienced during the training sessions.

What key resources would people who want to learn from your experience need access to?

- The Listening Groups Pack (West Mansfield Sure Start)   Narrative Groups Black Sheep Press (2007)

What CPD session and resources were particularly useful?

Each training session as described above were very useful and the information in the"Mentoring and Coaching CPD Capacity Building Project - National Framework for Mentoring and Coaching." Centre for the use of Research and Evidence in Education (CUVEE).

If another individual or school was attempting to replicate this work, where would they start and what would the essential elements be?

The principles and strategies needed to introduce and use the 'Owling' techniques are very simple and easy to use . They are a perfect starting point to support individual children in 'Learning to Talk and Talking to Learn'. As listed there is a website for Hanen and local Speech and Language staff should be able to support with this. The Black Sheep resources can be obtained via the Black Sheep website. Sue Heaven is happy to be contacted and could help with the Listening Group approach. This whole strategy can be as small or as large as is appropriate and every setting can use it to meet their local needs.

What further developments are you planning to do (or would you like to see others do)?

In my own setting we intend to maintain our approach and update and provide new training on a regular basis. We need to continue to find ways to support our parents and carers.We are also hoping to benefit from training from our Children's Centre for our staff to become confident in using 'Rhyme time'. This is a project which supports families with children before they start Nursery in sessions involving singing, movement and music (Sure Start Children's Centres in partnership with Warsop Library). We feel this will extend our skills with the youngest of our learners.

Our LA are working hard to open up this training opportunity to as many practitioners as possible.

Supplementary Materials

This report is accompanied in the library by the following supplementary material:

- The missing piece of the jigsaw - Let's interact
- Attention levels tracker sheet

- Video analysis sheet (blank)
- British Picture Vocabulary Scale results
- End of FSP average scores 2008-9
- Pupil progress data (2008 cohort)

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This case study was originally published as part of the 'What Works Well' section of the National Strategies for Education in England. The National Strategies were professional programmes aiming for improvements in the quality of learning and teaching in schools in England. 'What Works Well' involved teaching practitioners from all phases and areas of education sharing accounts of real developments which had improved learning and teaching, and made a difference to pupil progress. 'What Works Well' case studies were designed to support practice transfer and include sufficient detail and resources to enable others to implement the effective practice described. They were reviewed by experts prior to publication as 'User Generated Content' (UGC) under a licence which encouraged reuse and derivative works, but which precluded commercial use.

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