

Get Ready for Learning:

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

Executive Summary

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Background

A growing number of children in UK primary schools are learning English as an Additional Language (EAL; DfES, 2015) and these children tend to show poorer performance on statutory tests of language and literacy in primary school compared to their monolingual peers (DfES, 2014; [Strand, 2015](#)). In addition, a significant proportion of monolingual children 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. This paper reports 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. A second feasibility study is also discussed. Both studies were funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

Study 1: Randomised Controlled Trial

Method

A randomised controlled trial was carried out in 10 schools in the North of England. Eighty children (n=40 EAL and n=40 monolingual) were randomly allocated to receive 18 weeks of oral language intervention in reception class. A further 80 children (n=40 EAL and n=40 monolingual) formed a waiting control group. Intervention was delivered by trained teaching assistants in school on a daily basis, alternating between group and individual sessions. The intervention targeted oral language skills, specifically vocabulary, grammar, narrative skills and listening. Phonological awareness activities were also included in the programme. Children were assessed at regular intervals over the course of the study; at screening and pre-test before the intervention, midway through the intervention, immediately after the intervention, after a 6 month delay and again after a further 6 months by which time the waiting control group had also received intervention. The results in this paper focus on the effects of the programme immediately after the intervention and after an initial 6 month delay.

Findings

The outcomes from our main study demonstrate improvements in taught vocabulary but no generalisation to broader language skills, our primary outcome measures, immediately after the intervention. Following a 6 month delay the

intervention group still showed an advantage on taught vocabulary but no other differences were statistically significant. In contrast the waiting control group appeared to outperform the intervention group on one of our measures of expressive vocabulary (a primary outcome) and spelling (a secondary outcome) 6 months after the intervention.

Study 2: Feasibility Study

Method

Two schools contacted the research team requesting to deliver the programme in their settings. This gave us the opportunity to carry out a feasibility study investigating the impact of the intervention when delivered under real-life conditions, and collecting detailed feedback from staff. This paper reports the comparison of a small group of seven children receiving intervention and six children who formed a waiting control group. All of the children were learning EAL. In addition, five members of staff were asked for their feedback using a focus group and interview.

Findings

The intervention group appeared to show an advantage over the waiting control group on measures of oral language immediately after the intervention including listening comprehension and a standardised measure of expressive vocabulary. The control group made more progress on measures of expressive grammar and early word reading. However, the results are descriptive and the sample size is very small, therefore the result must be interpreted with caution. Results from the focus groups and interviews indicate that TAs were generally positive about the programme. However, TAs commented that the programme was not suited for children with the lowest language skills and that some of the activities were too hard. They also found it difficult to fit the intervention into the school timetable. Nonetheless, TAs noted that the children who received the intervention had benefitted particularly in terms of confidence.

Overall Summary

The results reported in this paper indicate that the programme was successful in teaching new vocabulary to children learning EAL and monolingual children with language weaknesses. However, the programme did not result in

improvements to more general language skills. We discuss possible reasons for these results focusing on a) the design of the intervention, b) the implementation of the programme and c) the children taking part. In line with our discussion, the staff taking part in the feasibility study report that they found it difficult to fit the programme in to the school timetable and that the children taking part in the programme may not have been those most suited to this approach. However, staff were very positive about the programme and felt that the children taking part had increased in confidence over the course of the intervention. Given this feedback, it may be the case that alternative models of intervention involving parents and volunteers may need to be explored, and that intervention needs to be more carefully targeted to the needs of specific children. On a positive note, it may be the case that lack of treatment effects reflects an increased awareness of the importance of language in the classroom resulting in all children receiving rich language input, not just those receiving intervention.

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