



Supporting children to learn new words

Sophie Chalmers investigates three programmes that are helping to develop children's vocabulary and fluency

'I love watching children flourish and being able to communicate and make and keep friends,' says Pip St John. 'Communication is a fundamental skill that enables children to interact with other people and express themselves, while allowing them to fulfil their potential.'

Over the years she has been instrumental in developing the language and communication of children in the Blackburn area, and developing interventions to help her do this. Typical of the many schools she works with is Wensley Fold Primary School, a Schools Direct provider offering initial teacher training in the area of speech and language in conjunction with Cumbria University. In the course of their training, student teachers at the school spend a day with Mrs St John learning how to develop children's

speaking, listening and expressive language in a mainstream setting.

Assessing need

95% of pupils at Wensley Fold speak English as another language. Deprivation is also a significant feature of the Blackburn area. 'We have lots of issues with speech and language,' says headteacher Donna Simpson, 'regardless of what language children speak as their mother tongue.'

When the children first arrive in school, their receptive vocabulary is assessed using the British Picture Vocabulary Scale and other language assessments to ascertain their verbal understanding. Most have delayed language and quickly catch up with their typically developing peers, so that by the end of Reception, those who continue to have speech, language and communication difficulties tend to be those with SEND.

Pre-Teaching Vocabulary

One of the tools that has enabled children to progress so rapidly is the Pre-Teaching Vocabulary (PTV) programme, an evidenced approach to teaching children how to learn new words. PTV was created by Mrs St John and is listed in The Communication Trust's What Works database at indicative level. It provides a

formal framework to ensure children from Foundation to Key Stage 4 understand new words and then learn them well enough to be able to recall and use them effectively.

Mrs St John was working as an advisory teacher for the borough when she developed the approach. She used it with a child at Wensley Fold who was severely impaired by developmental language disorder and the results were so impressive that the school bought into the concept.

PTV involves the use of symbols and pictures on visual prompt cards, and children are systematically supported to learn aspects of words (both phonological and semantic). As a targeted intervention, the programme is designed to be delivered at least three times a week, using key words from one topic area, to groups of around six children. At a universal level, the PTV principle is generalised into all curriculum areas to reinforce the acquisition of new vocabulary. It is not long before children have the tools they need to learn new words on their own.

'Every child at Wensley Fold accesses PTV in Reception,' says Mrs Simpson. 'While the intervention groups get smaller over time as children's language skills improve, teachers continue to model the approach to the whole class for the Word of the Week, so that all children

get regular practice. In Year 1, we continue to use it in universal provision, particularly for technical language and the “Goldilocks” words (Beck, McKeown & Kucan 2002), which are needed to access the curriculum. These include words like assess, analyse, compare and contrast.’

Karen Jack, SENCO at Wensley Fold, explains how it works. ‘Essentially we look at a word in detail for 10-15 minutes as part of literacy teaching. For example, what letter does the word start with? Is it short, medium or long? We clap out the syllables, which are each colour coded and stuck into children’s books. Categorising the word is really important because this is where children are taught how to file and retrieve information in their brains, which might be different from the way teachers do this. With older classes, we include additional information like antonyms and synonyms, and children might make up their own actions for the word.’

‘For the next part of the session children play games with the sounds and the word, and put the word into sentences. Finally there is a song to help them lock the word into their memory.’

Children who are brought out of lessons to work on PTV as an intervention are also assessed using the Word Learning Score. Prior to working on topic words, the children are asked individually to say everything they know about a word, ahead of small group intervention. Once the topic is covered, this is repeated and any improvement shows that the child has internalised the word knowledge.

Chatty Hands

Another programme developed by Mrs St John in conjunction with school staff is Chatty Hands. ‘In one of the schools I was working with, some of the children had quite extensive language difficulties and they were trying Makaton to see if that would help,’ she says.

Using Makaton to augment spoken language supports children who are not physically capable of making sounds that people can readily understand. ‘It reduces their frustration at not being able to communicate clearly with speech,’ says Mrs Jack. ‘What we don’t want is for children to think: “I can’t speak clearly; nobody listens to me so I won’t bother saying anything.”’

‘We identify children who have a need in Reception,’ she continues. ‘The Chatty Hands Club takes place on Thursday while the rest of the school is doing Wake and Shake. Parents attend the group every week and learn Makaton alongside their



A pupil discuss a possible ending to a story with Mrs St John

children. The school is starting to involve siblings as well. The group learns a new Makaton sign in each session, and sings a Makaton-supported song or rhyme to reinforce learning. Sometimes we pick a song or a rhyme from Singing Hands on YouTube and watch it together before we practise signing it.’ As pupils’ fluency improves, the Year 1 group might model a song to the Reception group.

‘The lesson is reinforced through parents practising with their children back at home,’ says Mrs St John. ‘Some of the children I worked with in September had no speech, and by Easter they were trying to verbalise alongside their Makaton. It has made a huge difference to them, as well as their parents.’

In the same way that staff make PTV universal, they will introduce an element of Makaton throughout the day, sometimes in a song, linking signs to the curriculum wherever possible. All the staff have basic training in Makaton although their fluency depends on how much they use it.

‘Parents love Chatty Hands and understand that this is something that we have put in place to bring on their children’s language skills,’ says Mrs Jack. ‘They want to help their children so there has never been an issue with parents not turning up to a session. The model is so successful that we are aiming to roll out the programme year on year so that we end up with a Key Stage 2 Chatty Hands Club.’

Oracy

Another important communication strand rolled out across all the years is oracy.

Paul Simpson, a trained actor and an associate of Mrs St John, is a peripatetic oracy teacher who teaches children at Wensley Fold how to speak in public.

‘He introduces them to the social rules of communication: making eye contact, looking around the room, speaking in a clear voice,’ says Mrs Simpson. ‘He also runs the school’s debating club, where they learn how to put an argument

together and how to counter an opposing point of view.’ Pupils compete with other schools that he works with across the borough.

Mr Simpson does a lot of work around developing inference and understanding through poetry, and teaches the children to deliver a poem expressively, which has boosted their comprehension skills.

In Reception, he runs a programme based on storytelling where he records a story, which the children recount back to him and act out. This has done wonders for their confidence in terms of the spoken word and being able to stand up and present their ideas to the class.

A touch that goes down well with all the pupils are his prizes for speaking out – he takes about 40 pineapples into school a week, which he gives to children to take home for being, say, the best speaker in their group, for just being brave enough to have a go, for speaking up in assembly or being Speaker of the Week. ‘He calls it the Pineapple of Bravery because it wears a crown on the top,’ says Mrs Jack. ‘The thinking behind it is that pineapples are brave and strong and sweet on the inside, always wear a crown and always stand tall, which is something pupils really relate to. They also get a badge to sew on to their jumper called the Pineapple of Bravery Badge.’

Lifetime achievement

Mrs St John’s passion and expertise in developing children’s communication skills, and in particular the huge impact she has had on children and staff in the Blackburn area, earned her the accolade of Communication Champion at the national Shine a Light Awards this year.

‘She is only here one day a week, but you would think she was here more because she’s everywhere,’ observes Mrs Simpson on the video Wensley Fold submitted to support her nomination. ‘Her knowledge around speech and language and oracy work is phenomenal and I think her mantra of never giving up on children is something I will always follow and keep in my heart.’

FIND OUT MORE

- Pre-Teaching Vocabulary is free from <http://pipstjohn.co.uk>
- Nominations for the Shine a Light Awards 2019, sponsored by Pearson in partnership with The Communication Trust, are now open. <http://bit.ly/sc244-06>
- The British Picture Vocabulary Scale (3rd edition) is used to assess a child’s receptive vocabulary from age three to 16. <http://bit.ly/sc244-05>