

THE PRIMARY SCHOOL ORAL COMMUNICATION PROJECT: BRIEFING PAPER – AUGUST 2013

Summary

A controlled research project recently carried out in Bedfordshire primary schools has shown that children who are given more opportunities to develop their verbal and oral communication skills gain in self confidence, and do better in their school subjects and National Curriculum Key Stage 2 assessments than children denied those opportunities.

Background

Over a three year period, more than a thousand children and their teachers in twelve schools in Bedfordshire have helped develop new teaching materials for the primary sector which extend pupils' skills of oral communication. The activities - which focus on the use of persuasive speech, argument, questioning and spontaneous response, public speaking, and debating – aim to place children in situations which encourage an educationally mature level of verbal exchange with their peers, boosting their self-confidence and their command and understanding of English.

In this associated research project, children in years 3 and 4 in two schools were divided into matched groups using educational and social factors. One group (randomly selected) in each school followed some of the new activities for one teaching session a week over two terms, whilst alternative activities were arranged for the others. Nationally standardised tests were administered to all the pupils both before and after this period, and the schools' interim Key Stage 2 assessments recorded on the same basis.

Outcomes

Subsequent statistical analysis showed that children who followed the programme had, on average, highly significant improvements in their test scores far in excess of the others, and equivalent to extra gains of several months. This was reflected in all four curriculum areas for which the schools provided Key Stage 2 data, where the mean scores of the children in the programme increased by between 6% and 19% more than the others.

Whilst the benefits were widely spread, they were particularly marked for children of lesser ability, pupils for whom English is a second or additional language, and boys.

Implications for schools and the National Curriculum

The above findings have been submitted to the Secretary of State as part of the consultation process on the proposed new National Curriculum, with the recommendation that consideration should be given in the draft order to strengthening the role of speaking and listening in the development of language and literacy skills.

The submission continues that the aim should be for all pupils – regardless of academic ability or command of English – to be able to use language effectively, and to be confident and competent at interacting with others through requiring them to present, listen, think, question, respond to and challenge the views of their peers in a variety of situations.

Improvements in pupils' competence, confidence and school performance may be expected to follow, with particular benefits for children of lesser ability and those for whom English is an additional language.

Notes

1. Trials of these new materials will continue during 2013-2014 prior to publication. There are some opportunities available for additional schools to join the trials especially with children in years 5 and 6.
2. Further information on any of the above is available from Dr Tony Wood, Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the University of Bedfordshire, on tony.wood@redrobin.me.uk tel: 01234 349395.

The Primary School Oral Communication Project is jointly sponsored by the University of Bedfordshire and The ESU.

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Quote from the Project Director Dr Tony Wood

“Most people would accept that an ability to use language effectively and be confident and competent in dialogue with others can be a great asset in life. What this research has shown for the first time is that helping children develop these skills will also result in improved school performance and progress – undoubtedly a win-win situation for both pupils and teachers”.