

Learning to Listen

Kath Jeffries, The Lyndale School (Formerly Clatterbridge School), Wirral LEA

Liz Newton, Advisory Teacher Early Years, Wirral LEA

> Aims

- To modify the structured teaching programme 'Learning to Listen' (devised for a special school) for use in mainstream nursery classes.
- To monitor the effects of the programme in improving the listening skills of young children.
- To examine the support, training and professional development implications for teachers using the programme.

> Dimensions of this Case Study

Seven schools were chosen that had been identified as needing intensive support in the National Literacy Strategy. Forty-two children, aged 3 to 3½ years from the nurseries or feeder nurseries of these schools, were selected to take part in this study. Ten pupils from 2 further low performing schools were identified as a control group.

> Summary of Findings for this Case Study

- The very structured teaching programme was effective when used with small groups in mainstream nursery classes.
- Teachers noticed that children's attention skills improved in many cases.
- In the intervention group, the comprehension of 9 out of 32 children improved by 15 or more marks (measured on the Reynell Developmental Language Scales III), compared with one child out of 10 in the control group. The Speech and Language Therapists, who use this test regularly in their work, were very impressed by this improvement.
- Some children were able to use the strategies learned in the group sessions to help them listen effectively at other times in the classroom.
- Teachers using the programme successfully:
 - followed the session guidance carefully;
 - created good environments for listening which minimised distractions and increased concentration;
 - maintained regular sessions by sharing the lead adult role with the nursery nurse; and
 - were motivated by regular documenting of children's subtle responses to the programme.

- The interaction between teachers and therapists and the opportunities for multi-professional working were essential for the effectiveness of the project. Teachers particularly welcomed the professionalism, support, advice and enthusiasm of the therapists.
- Teachers increased their knowledge and understanding about some aspects of language development and honed their monitoring and assessment skills.
- Teachers learned to monitor, minimise and simplify their own classroom language.

Background

In 1997, the head of Speech and Language Therapy Services (Wirral NHS Trust) led a training course for teachers about early language development. Teachers were finding it difficult to meet the needs of those children coming into their nursery classes who were easily distracted and not ready to listen. Familiar strategies such as telling rhymes and stories, even listening to one another, required a level of listening skill that some children did not possess. If children could not listen effectively how were they going to learn and how would learning targets be met? Yet there was little in early years' literature to help teachers address the issue. Special needs literature was a more productive source of information. Is it only children with special needs that need to be taught effective listening skills?

What happened?

The head of speech and language therapy services for Wirral and a teacher from a special school had devised a teaching programme for nursery children with complex learning difficulties. It was used partly to encourage these children to appreciate the rules of effective listening:

STOP – sit still / reduce restlessness;

LOOK – pay attention / focus;

LISTEN – and learn.

The teacher and therapist noticed children's comprehension of language improved when the rules of listening were secure. Some children were able to use these rules in other situations in the classroom.

The TTA research project 'Learning to Listen' was set up to address the following questions:

- Could the listening programme be modified for use in mainstream nursery classes?
- Would teachers in mainstream classes have the specialist knowledge or skills to use it and, if not, how could such skills be acquired?
- Would the programme make a difference to children's learning?

The project was led by the special school nursery teacher and an advisory teacher for early years, in association with the head of speech and language therapy services and her deputy

Seven primary schools, identified as needing intensive support in the National Literacy Strategy, were chosen. Staff in nursery classes attached to 4 of these schools and at 2 feeder nursery schools were invited to take part in the project. Each was asked to identify a group of 6 children aged 3 to 3¹/₂ years, not receiving speech and language therapy already, to take part in the listening programme.

A control group of 10 children was drawn from a nursery department and feeder nursery of similar schools. These children continued with their normal nursery curriculum for listening activities.

In September 1998, the therapists briefed the nursery teachers and nursery nurses about the stages of development of children's attention skills, known as 'attention control' (Cooper, Moodley and Reynell, 1985). They gave explicit guidance on how to conduct and record the sessions, including instructions for creating better conditions for listening by encouraging concentration and reducing distraction. It was agreed that the sessions could be led by either the class teacher or nursery nurse.

The Learning to Listen programme

The programme was very structured. Activities to develop attention control were introduced in daily sessions of 10 minutes. The lead adult began by stating the rules for effective listening - STOP, LOOK, LISTEN - whilst demonstrating the desired behaviour with gestures, e.g. finger on lip, cupping ear with hand. The rules were restated as necessary during the session.

Activity 1 was to teach the children to listen to and discriminate between sounds made by sets of 4 sound makers, e.g. bells, tambourines, clackers etc. A key principle was to introduce symbolic noises before spoken language so that the children could focus on sounds without having to understand speech. The teacher demonstrated the sound made by one sound maker, passing it round the group to encourage the children to make the sound. She then used the matching instrument, from behind a screen, to make the sound together with each child in turn. The activity was developed in subsequent sessions by using the 2nd and 3rd instruments separately and so on. In session 5 all 4 sound makers were used in turn.

Activity 2 was designed to develop auditory memory i.e. retaining language so that it can be processed. The teacher presented 8 objects, e.g. cup, pencil, ball, etc. one at a time to the children and named it. The objects were placed on the floor and, when all were in front of the children, each child in turn was asked to select a named object. During week 2 the children had to select 2 named objects, and in week 3, 3 objects. In week 4, the objects were placed out of sight of the children so that, when the children were asked to select 2 named objects, they had to rely on their auditory memory alone (rather than visual and auditory) to remember which objects to select. During week 5 the children had to collect 3 objects and during week 6, 4 objects. Differentiation guidelines were provided, as it was vital that children did not move on to the next part of the programme before they were secure on the current part. Careful record keeping, using prepared sheets, was essential to monitor the progress of each child.

The objects and sound makers were changed after 6-weeks to maintain the interest and enthusiasm of the children.

Speech and Language Therapists' concerns

Therapists were concerned that the teachers might see the programme as being too simplistic, boring, repetitive and insufficiently challenging. Based on their professional understanding of child language development, they thought that teachers in mainstream were introducing children to very demanding listening activities too soon. For example, they saw teachers working on children's listening skills with activities that involved complex language rather than sounds.

Teachers' impressions

Teachers reported at the half-termly support seminars that the children were very enthusiastic. Several teachers were encouraged by evidence of the children's success. The secure routines had helped to build children's confidence. One child had reminded his partners during another activity that they should, "stop, look and listen".

Teachers felt that sessions were most successful when the guidance and routine were closely matched.

Teachers valued the regular opportunities to observe individual children in a small group and saw the benefits of success for some of their children much more clearly.

Many teachers recognised that the project had been useful for their own professional development. They used the Stop, Look, Listen gestures to gain attention in other classroom situations. They noticed if children were attentive before they issued instructions and were aware of creating better conditions for listening. Teachers became alert to their own classroom language:

"I'm more conscious of what I say."

"I think more carefully about explanations and instructions."

"I cut down on my volume of information."

Other comments from teachers included:

"The programme has exceeded my expectations."

"My head teacher can pick out the group of children who have used the listening programme."

"Listening skills are developed well in the nursery through activities where the children have to listen carefully to a range of sounds and report to the group which sounds they have heard. During the inspection, two sessions of this effective provision were observed and the pupils made good progress in the short, well-planned activity." (OFSTED 1999

Implementing the programme

The following were found to be essential:

- regular sessions;
- sharing of the lead role between teachers and nursery nurses, providing mutual support;
- careful planning and record keeping, that a) ensured a consistent approach and b) documented the subtleties of children's progress (e.g. maintaining concentration during the entire session without prompting) motivating staff;
- detailed activity sheets provided by the therapists; and
- appropriate timing of sessions, e.g. children were too tired by the end of the afternoon session.

Observation of sessions

The teacher researchers observed sessions, led by teachers, in all nurseries taking part.

Teachers

Teachers were observed following the guidance fully in 5 nurseries. In one nursery the teacher did not use simple language and in 2 nurseries differentiated support guidance was not used and the session took longer than 10 minutes.

Children (class groups)

All groups observed showed a positive response to the start of the lesson. Six of the seven groups were familiar with the location and organisation of the session, the stated rules and the resources. The children remained appropriately seated and focused throughout the session and displayed success at the differentiated levels of the activities.

Making a difference to children's learning

The therapists tested 54 children at the start of the programme and re-tested 42 children still in the nursery schools at the end of the programme. The results shown below are based on scores in the Reynell Developmental Language Scales III (comprehension section). This test measures a child's ability to:

- make inferences from pictures and
- understand:
 - a) single words;
 - b) word types, - nouns, verbs, adjectives, e.g. does the child understand 'big'; and
 - c) that grammar changes meaning.

If children had developed better attention control it was expected that this would be reflected in improved scores in comprehension.

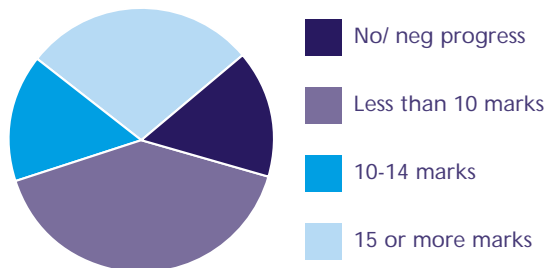
Scores were age standardised on a scale from 0 – 100. As 65% of the population would score between 40 – 60, 40 was taken as the baseline for this study.

At the start of the programme one third of the intervention group (11 children) and half of the control group (5 children) were on or below the baseline of 40 marks. After the programme 5 children in the intervention group and 2 in the control group fell into this category.

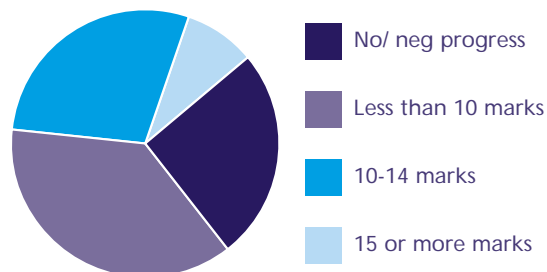
84% of children in the intervention group and 80% in the control group made some progress. However, 9 children (28%) improved by 15 marks or more in the intervention group compared to 1 child (10%) in the control group.

Learning to Listen: comparison of the progress made by the intervention group and the control group

Intervention group



Control group



Teachers reported that some children were able to apply the strategies learnt in the group sessions to other activities in the classroom. For some children school attendance and confidence had improved as a result of their involvement in the programme. Parents were eager for their children to take part.

Support, training and development implications

Most teachers felt that until they joined in the project, they had been given no specific training to teach listening skills. They relied on providing opportunities for listening rather than teaching the skills required.

Teachers were frustrated when continuity was disrupted and future plans would need to accommodate this, e.g. by increasing the flexibility of the programme.

By working as part of a multi-professional team, the teachers increased their knowledge and understanding about some aspects of language development and honed their monitoring and assessment skills.

The teachers and nursery nurses valued the support of the teacher from the special school who had worked through the programme with her own class.

Future plans

The findings from the project have been used in support of a successful local bid for funding to extend the programme to all nursery classes in the LEA. This will ensure that staff new to the programme will be given training and guidance by the therapists. Some teachers from the project have formed a core group to support the new teachers and are planning how to extend the programme to benefit all their children. They are agreed – all children need to ‘learn to listen’ so that they can ‘listen to learn’.

Note on methods

The children were tested by the therapists, with permission from parents.

Further reading

Cooper, J., Moodley, M. and Reynell, J. (1978) *Helping Language Development: A Developmental Programme for Children with Early Learning Handicaps*. London: Edward Arnold

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Contact

Kath Jeffries, Lyndale School, Lyndale Avenue, Eastham Wirral CH62 8DE (Clatterbridge School renamed and relocated in 1999).

Liz Newton, WPDC, Acre Lane, Bromborough, Wirral, CH62 7BZ.

Tel: 0151 346 1182,

Fax: 0151 343 9352

Barbara McLennan, Head of Speech and Language Therapy Service, St. Catherine's Community Hospital, Birkenhead, Wirral Tel: 0151 604 7280

Mike Johnson, MMU, SEN Centre, Didsbury School of Education, 799, Wilmslow Road, Didsbury, Manchester. M20 2RR.

Tel: 0161 247 2060

Fax: 0161 247 6369

E-mail: M.C. JOHNSON@MMU.AC.UK

www.teach-tta.gov.uk

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