Supporting pupils with SLI in Secondary Schools: Evaluation of a Pilot Study

Wilson, G.

Background

Specific Language Impairment (SLI) is “fairly common” with a prevalence of around 7% in the preschool population (Tomblin et al. 1997). Speech & Language Therapists (SLT), in collaboration with parents and education professionals, can provide intervention to improve language learning in the early years. For some children language difficulties may resolve but for others these difficulties may persist into teenage years and adulthood (Reed, 2005).

Clinicians and Researchers are increasingly aware of the needs of young people with SLI during adolescence. Longitudinal research confirms clinical reports that SLI can impact upon a young person’s social, emotional and educational development. Those with persistent language difficulties may also experience attention and social difficulties (Snowling et al. 2006).

Young people with SLI are largely educated within mainstream schools. The secondary school curriculum places huge demands on their language skills. In comparison to primary, the demands on reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition also increase significantly.

Project Remit

NHS Fife Speech & Language Therapy Service received funding from the Changing Children’s Services Fund to:

• Identify the needs of young people with SLI in Fife secondary schools.
• Devise and develop a sustainable model of service delivery which includes appropriate intervention to support pupils’ needs.

The starting point: the current management of SLI

Models of SLT service delivery in secondary schools vary greatly. Larson et al. (1993) identified possible models of SLT service delivery, for example, a traditional withdrawal model or a consultative model, although each of them has its limitations. As an alternative, an integrated model of support was developed through working with an existing model of SLT support in NHS Lothian.

The proposed integrated model to support pupils with SLI *

• Collaborative working with Support for Learning and Class Teachers.
• Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to develop the skills of staff supporting pupils with SLI.
• ICT to support language learning in class.
• Linguistic differentiation of subject materials.
• Structured approaches to vocabulary teaching and learning (Beck et al., 2002, Lubliner, 2005).

* The model was developed in conjunction with the SLT Secondary Schools Service in NHS Lothian.

Project evaluation

Separate focus groups for staff and pupils were run in two schools to evaluate the project development.

The comments reported here have been chosen to highlight teacher/pupil comments relating to ‘structured approaches to vocabulary teaching & learning’

Teacher comments:

1. The relevance of joint working with SLT to meet the needs of pupils with SLI.

I soon realised that the support the SLT could offer was much broader: to meet the needs of those pupils with SLI but also to assist me with my teaching of all pupils with difficulties in understanding the curriculum.

2. The impact on teaching practices following joint work with SLT.

I didn’t think about the amount of repetition and emphasis that was required (for new vocabulary) … before.

We worked on language in passing (before) rather than spending time on the actual acquisition and I liked the fact that we did lessons on acquiring new language before we did the task.

3. Comments on the impact on the pupils following the teacher’s work with SLT.

The focus on vocabulary has done their confidence the power of good with language.

The pupils seem pleased when they learn and use a new word… they are quite inspired.

They have been reassured that it is ok not to know what a word means and they are developing their use of strategies to find out what it means.

4. Increase in awareness of pupil difficulties.

I thought certain words were going to be straightforward and they really weren’t. I realised that vocabulary was a huge barrier.

I didn’t realise how much reinforcement pupils would need. We are doing a lot going back and consolidation and referring back to things which have been dealt with… bit by bit they are bringing together their knowledge.

Pupil comments:

1. Pupils described how activities which were delivered in their classroom by the SLT & teacher helped their learning.

I thought the PowerPoint helped cause I’m more like a visual learner… the pictures are what I need.

I like the way we did pictures about new words. It’s good if you can see what it is like, I remember more like that.

When the teacher is talking, if they use the word again and again you won’t forget it. But they have to say it lots of times.

It’s good when they like show stuff to you first & then explain it.

If they describe to us in easier words what they want us to do, that helps. They need to use words I know!

2. Pupils identified strategies they would like more staff to use to support their understanding/learning.

People are quiet cause they want a shot (all using the SmartBoard). It helps me when people are quiet.

PowerPoint gets people to be less quiet… & pay attention.

They have been reassured that it is ok not to know what a word means and they are developing their use of strategies to find out what it means.

3. The pupils made recommendations for work which should be taken forward by the SLT in other subject areas and in other schools.

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References


Acknowledgements

Changing Children’s Services Fund
NHS Fife Primary School
NHS Fife Speech & Language Therapy Service