Empowering Educational Professionals to Create Strong Language Provision in Early and Primary School Settings

Introduction and background

Many children now enter formal education with reduced levels of proficiency in oral language. This is concerning, since well-developed oral language skills are strongly linked not only with academic achievement but also with social, emotional, and mental health and long-term outcomes. Children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and who are English language learners are at high risk of limited oral language skills which impacts on later educational achievement and socio-emotional functioning. There are also concerns about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and prolonged periods away from early years settings has had on children's language skills. This current research project was carried out by Dr Ioanna Bakopoulou and her colleagues at the University of Bristol School of Education. It aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of a programme called Supporting Spoken Language in the Classroom (SSLiC). The current research report details the evaluation findings from the implementation of the SSLiC Programme in a number of early years settings and primary schools across 2 local authorities in the academic year 2022-2023. Data was collected through observations of pupils, classroom observations, staff questionnaires, and interviews.

Key findings

Results from settings observations

- Observations were conducted in 20 settings in 2 local authorities, Plymouth and Bristol. Researchers observed Nursery classes (N = 13), Reception classes (N = 12), Year 1 classes (N = 11) and Year 2 classes (N = 12).
- Researchers used 2 measures for the observations. The first was the Communication Supporting Classrooms Observation Tool (CSCOT) that assesses the language learning classroom environment. The CSCOT comprises 3 dimensions: Language Learning Environment (LLE); Language Learning Opportunities (LLO); and Language Learning Interactions (LLI). For each observation, a CSCOT total score was calculated by adding the total scores of each dimension.
- The other tool used was the Pupil Engagement Measure. This measure involves taking a random sample of 6 children per year group in the participating settings and observing them for approximately 5 minutes to determine their level of engagement with the activity taking place in the lesson. The pupil's engagement is rated on a scale from 0 (No engagement) to 5 (High engagement).
- Researchers looked at the differences observed in classroom environments and pupil engagement before and after the implementation of the SSLiC Programme.
- In terms of classroom environments, there was an increase in scores in all 3 dimensions of the CSCOT observed across all 4 year groups following the implementation of the SSLiC programme.
- Post-test median scores were statistically significantly higher than pre-test median scores in Nursery but not for any other year group.
- There was a statistically significant difference for the dimension of Language Learning Environment in Nursery and in Reception year groups but not in Year One or Year Two year groups.

- For the dimension of Language Learning Opportunities there was no statistically significant difference across any of the year groups. For the Language Learning Interactions dimension, there was a statistically significant difference in Nursery but not for any other year groups.
- Researchers then explored differences in Pupil Engagement scores across the 4 year groups before and after the implementation of the SSLiC Programme. There was an overall increase in scores (particularly for nursery), but no statistically significant differences were observed.

End of programme survey results

- The end of programme online survey was completed by 23 educational professionals across participating settings. There were 8 respondents from Plymouth early years settings and 15 respondents from Bristol early years and primary school settings.
- At the first part of the survey, participants were asked their views on the SSLiC Programme, its' overall structure and materials and support offered as part of the programme. Using a 5-point Likert scale (from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree), participants were asked to rate the programme's overall structure and materials as well as support provided by the SSLiC Facilitator.
- Participants were overwhelmingly positive about the SSLiC Programme's structure and materials. For example, 65 per cent strongly agreed and 35 per cent agreed that the SSLiC Audit allowed them to appraise the level of provision in their setting and identify areas for improvement. Fifty-seven per cent strongly agreed and 43 per cent agreed that the SSLiC Case Studies had inspired development work in their setting.

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- Participants were asked to rate any changes in their knowledge and practice as a result of taking part in the SSLiC Programme. Here again, responses were overwhelmingly positive. Forty-eight per cent strongly agreed and 52 per cent agreed that taking part in the SSLiC Programme had given them a better understanding of facilitators and barriers to implementing changes in their setting's language provision. Thirty-five per cent strongly agreed and 65 per cent agreed that taking part in the SSLiC Programme had increased their knowledge and understanding of how to improve the language provision in their setting.
- Although the aim of the SSLiC Programme was to develop educational practice, 26 per cent of respondents strongly agreed and 61 per cent agreed that taking part in the programme facilitated improvements in direct pupil outcomes.
- Finally, participants were asked to rate the SSLiC Programme overall. Eleven respondents rated it as 'Excellent' (48%), 11 rated it as 'Very Good' (48%) and 1 respondent rated it as 'Good' (4.3%). When asked whether they would recommend the SSLiC Programme to other settings, 15 respondents strongly agreed (65%), and 8 respondents agreed (35%).

Results from interviews

- At the end of the SSLiC programme, one participant from each setting was interviewed.
- Within all interviews, there was an emphasis on the origins of the SSLiC Programme (i.e., the factors which contributed to the initial direction and rationale for the setting-based project). A key factor here was the role of language and communication within the setting's overall priorities. Participants discussed their desire to improve their setting's universal language provision and provide high-quality teaching for all pupils. One participant commented that 'unless the universal language provision is right, doing more targeted or specialist work is much harder'. Respondents noted that participation in the SSLiC Programme often aligned to the high priority which the setting placed on improving children's oracy.
- Contextual factors provided a strong rationale for the direction of the setting based SSLiC project. These included the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the need to support pupils with English as an Additional Language and some children entering settings with very low levels of language.
- Participants felt that the SSLiC Programme would enable them to build on existing practice in their settings, thereby keeping the momentum going. They also expressed the view that the SSLiC Programme provided a tailored approach to professional development needed in their setting.
- Participants appreciated the SSLiC Facilitator support in the creation, implementation, and monitoring of their setting's Action Plan. They valued the facilitator's ability to translate complex research literature into accessible and relevant materials. The facilitator was also seen as effectively supporting with the evaluation and research element of the SSLiC Programme.
- Early in the programme, each setting formed a Communication Team which included key members of staff. Its role was to champion the importance of communication and prioritise actions related to the improvement of communication outcomes for children. Participants emphasised the benefits of having such a

team - these included the involvement of SLT and the enabling of collaborative work across different systems or phases in the setting. For example, one participant noted how collaborative working had provided them with a greater understanding of issues related to transition from early years to Key Stage 1 curriculum.
- Programme participants emphasised how participation in the project enabled them to access good quality professional development directly linked to their role in the setting. They appreciated the use of a robust and repeatable observation tool (CSCOT) and the opportunities for creating setting-specific resources. Participants also reported that they found the SSLiC Review Day to be particularly beneficial in terms of learning about other settings' projects, taking ideas and sharing resources with other settings.
- Participants highlighted several factors which could influence future investment. The first was the perceived positive impact of the SSLiC Programme, including the embedding of the programme in everyday teaching practice, and the improvement of staff's skills in supporting spoken language. Participants also noted how the implementation of the programme had led to a consistency of approach. A second factor was the use of research evidence, although a perceived barrier to the use of research use was a lack of time available to focus on development work at a whole school level.
- During the SSLiC Programme, some settings developed their own measures which informed the direction of their project. For example, one setting developed a questionnaire to obtain parental views on the setting's 'Top Tips on Developing Spoken Language' document.

Implications for policy and practice

- Firstly, our results have shown that, overall, following implementation of the SSLiC Programme, children's learning engagement increased over time in participating settings, as did the quality of classroom language learning environments. However, results also highlighted the tension in educational practice between support for children's language learning needs and the demands of the English classroom curriculum. As such, an important implication from our study relates to the demand to raise the profile of the importance of spoken language in education by putting oracy on an equal footing with literacy and numeracy and recognising its importance beyond the early years.
- Practitioners reported that taking part in a structured universal programme such as SSLiC facilitated improvements in direct pupil outcomes. This indicates a need to equip educational professionals and settings to provide sustained, and comprehensive high-quality language teaching for all children. This can be achieved by developing oracy leaders in educational settings to enable a learning culture and the conditions for oracy to thrive.
- The study results indicate a demand for evidence-based professional development, built on tailored, sustained support with 'expert mentors'. There is also a need for effective evidence-based tools and resources.
- Finally, if we wish to establish a more evidence-informed practice in educational settings, professional development activities need to focus on enabling teacher capacity to engage in and with research.

You can find out more here:

https://www.bristol.ac.uk/people/person/Ioanna-Bakopoulou-1d8deb8c-8a8d-45f2-9a0c-d8a0bc5e6fda/