

Executive summary

The project

The Nuffield Early Language Intervention is designed to improve the spoken language ability of children during the transition from nursery to primary school. It is targeted at children with relatively poor spoken language skills. Three weekly sessions are delivered to groups of two to four children, starting in the final term of nursery and continuing in the first two terms of reception in primary school. Children in primary school also attend an additional two 15 minute individual sessions per week. All sessions focus on listening, narrative and vocabulary skills. Work on phonological awareness is introduced in the final ten weeks.

The intervention was developed by academics from the University of York with funding from the Nuffield Foundation. The communications charity I CAN was enlisted to train teaching assistants and nursery staff to deliver the programme. This report evaluates the I CAN-led model for the 30 week programme described above and also a shorter 20 week version delivered only in reception year.

The impact of these two programmes on the language skills of 350 children in 34 schools was tested using a randomised controlled trial design. Schools with attached nursery schools or nursery classes in Yorkshire and the South East were recruited to the trial in 2013. Children identified as having relatively low language skills were randomly allocated to the 30 week programme, the 20 week programme or standard provision. The qualitative fieldwork carried out as part of the project involved interviews with a total of 12 staff in 8 of the 34 participating schools.

Key conclusions

1. Both versions of the Nuffield Early Language Intervention had a positive impact on the language skills of children in the trial.
2. Children receiving the 30 week version experienced the equivalent of about four months of additional progress. This effect is unlikely to have occurred by chance. For the 20 week version the figure was smaller, equivalent to about two months, and slightly more likely to have occurred by chance.
3. The evaluation did not provide reliable evidence that either version of the programme had a positive impact on children's word-level literacy skills.
4. Teaching assistants delivering the programme reported that they found it difficult to devote enough time to it, and that support from senior staff was required to protect the programme time.
5. Staff in participating schools reported that the programme had a positive impact on children's language skills and confidence. They thought that the factors which contributed to this included the small group format, the activities covered and the focus on narrative and vocabulary work.

Security rating awarded as part of the EEF peer review process

Security rating

Findings from this trial have moderate to high security. The trial was set up as a randomised controlled trial, which aimed to compare the progress of children who received the interventions with that of similar children who did not. Randomisation was at the child level within nurseries/schools. The trial is classified as an efficacy trial, because it tested whether the intervention can work under ideal or developer-led conditions, but did not seek to demonstrate that the approach would work in all types of schools. The trial was large and well-conducted. The 'padlock' security rating is 4 rather than 5 because 11% of randomised pupils did not complete all the tests at the end of the project.

Findings

Children receiving the 30 week version experienced the equivalent of about four months of additional progress. This effect is unlikely to have occurred by chance. For the 20 week version the figure was smaller, equivalent to about two months, and slightly more likely to have occurred by chance.

The evaluation also measured the impact of the interventions on children six months after it ended. The results suggest that the impact may have actually increased over time (for both versions). However, it is not possible to say this with confidence, because not enough is known about what other activity the children were involved in during the six month follow up period.



On average, children who have better language skills also have better literacy skills, so it might be expected that if the programmes improved language skills then they would also improve children's literacy skills. However, this evaluation provided no reliable evidence that either version of the programme had a positive impact on children's word-level literacy skills in the short term.

Staff reported improvements in the spoken language skills, conversational ability, narrative skills and vocabulary of the participating children as well as improved listening skills and better general language development. Participating children were also perceived to be more confident, outgoing and conversational after taking part. Staff thought that the factors which contributed to the effectiveness of the programme were the small group format and regular sessions; the fun and engaging nature of the content; the focus on appropriate skills; and the repetition of knowledge across sessions. The process evaluation found that effective delivery of the programmes required staff to have adequate delivery and preparation time and the school to have a separate space where group and individual sessions could be delivered. Teaching assistants reported finding it hard to deal with the additional workload, and so schools might need to consider ways to ensure that provision of the programmes does not adversely impact other services provided by teaching assistants.

How much does it cost?

The programme is relatively cheap to buy, but requires significant delivery time from teaching assistants. The cost of giving one TA the training and materials to deliver the 30-week intervention is just under £2,500; for the 20-week intervention £1,400. Each TA could then deliver the intervention repeatedly. In terms of staff time, for the 20 week intervention the requirement is 4.5 hours per week for 20 weeks (90 hours) per group of 4 children. For the 30 week intervention there are an additional 10 weeks in nursery requiring 2 hours per week per group of 4 children, and resulting in a total requirement of 110 hours. These time requirements include some preparation time, although the process evaluation suggested additional preparation time is needed in practice.

Summary

Group	Effect size (95% confidence interval)	Estimated months' progress	Security rating	EEF cost rating
30 week vs. comparison	0.27 (0.07; 0.46)	4 months		£££££
20 week vs. comparison	0.16 (-0.02; 0.34)	2 months		£££££

Note: See notes to Table 11 for more details on how the impact estimates were calculated. See the 'cost' section in the 'impact evaluation' chapter for more detail on the EEF cost rating.