

Does the use of ‘Colourful Semantics’ in EYFS develop children’s oracy?

Southwold Primary School, EYFS

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the benefits of using the Colourful Semantics approach in scaffolding the development of sentence structure for both spoken and eventually written language in the EYFS. *“Colourful semantics is an approach created by Alison Bryan. It is aimed at helping children to develop their grammar but is rooted in the meaning of words (semantics). Colourful semantics reassembles sentences by cutting them up into their thematic roles and then colour codes them”* (What is Colourful Semantics? n.d.). Using whole class lessons and small group delivery, the study examined the impact of using the signifying colours and gestures which identify the subject, object, action and location of an event on the children’s ability to understand questions; respond appropriately and craft their own sentences. All children tracked in the study made accelerated progress with the majority achieving the Early Learning Goals (ELGs) for Communication, Language and Literacy (CLL) in the ‘speaking’ strand with some meeting the descriptors for ‘exceeding’.

Introduction

Southwold is a two form entry primary school in the London Borough of Hackney, providing for children between the ages of three and eleven. The proportions of pupils from minority ethnic groups and those who speak English as an additional language are much higher than the national average. The proportion of pupils eligible to receive the pupil premium is also higher than average. Most children start school with skills typically well below that expected for their age (Southwold-Primary-School-Ofsted-Report, 2014).





A specific area of focus across the school is the development of oracy across all areas of the curriculum to enable confident communication for all pupils (Southwold School Self-Evaluation 2017). There are many well-recognised factors which can negatively impact the development of children’s linguistic abilities including

disadvantaged socio-economic status (Locke, 2002) and the communication environment (Roulstone 2010). Teachers need to distinguish between the impact of cognitive abilities, temperament and the variation in the time needed to settle into a new setting (Locke 2002). Although most children leave Reception with expected levels of attainment, there is a need for an intervention to support lower-ability learners to enable acceleration of their progress and assist in closing the gap between them and their more linguistically able peers. To investigate this, the 'Colourful Semantics' approach was used to support children's understanding of four basic sentence parts or 'stages': the subject, object, action and location with four identifying colours and actions.

Research Process

The project was co-ordinated by the Phase Leader and run across the two reception classes. A group of ten children were identified who entered Reception at below expected levels in the 'Speaking' strand of 'Communication, Language and Literacy' but without observable special educational needs and were tracked across a six month timeframe. The project provided a structured approach for Reception teachers using Colourful Semantics for the first time as well as an opportunity to evaluate its effectiveness in supporting the language development of the low ability learners. The children's progress in Communication Language and Literacy and compared to their progress in the first half of the year before the intervention began.

Baseline, interim and end of term data were used as analytical bench marks. The first phase of the project required teachers to learn the process of using Colourful Semantics and this was accomplished during a staff meeting taught by speech and language therapists as well as observing the specialists model whole-class sessions. Teachers then proceeded to use the cues and teach the colours and gestures which signify the subject, object, action and location of an event through the daily literacy session in the context of the literary focus.

WHO Orange	WHAT DOING Yellow	WHAT Green	WHERE Blue
			

Thereafter, every time one of the questions words or the four basic sentence parts were used, the gesture would be enacted to reinforce the concept. This was useful to teachers as well as they were learning the system alongside the children. In addition to being incorporated into the whole class literacy session, the actions were used to reinforce questioning and sentence structure during literacy focus tasks and conversations throughout the setting.

To further support children's structuring of their sentences, small group work was established where children could play at creating 'silly sentences' using sentence strips and symbols. Children graduated from using one-stage responses to all four stages in their own sentences.

Progress from the baseline to the interim assessment and from the interim to the final assessment was determined by counting the number of sub bands (Early Education, 2012) a child attained in the 'Speaking' strand, subdivided into emerging, developing and secure until the ELG and Exceeding descriptors. As the expected level of attainment upon entry to reception is 40 - 60E and upon exit, the Early Learning Goals; a good level of progress would necessitate through achieving three levels of progress over the year or one part band term.

30 - 50			40 - 60			ELG	EX
E	D	S	E	D	S		

Key:	E = Emerging	D = Developing	S = Secure	ELG = Early Learning Goal	Ex = Exceeding
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Findings

Teachers gained a deeper understanding of the developmental progress of sentence structure acquisition and how to provide support and challenge. Often, it was enough

for the action to be used alongside the question for a child who usually struggled to be able to respond appropriately.

Children enjoyed using the actions and were engaged in their tasks and discussions. As they became more fluent in their use, there was a palpable feeling of satisfaction with their developing sense of ease and success in creating sentences. As their phonic skills evolved over the year, children were motivated to write and share their sentences; they were proud of what they were able to do and with their ability to communicate their own ideas to others. Using the scaffold of Colourful Semantics meant that much of the cognitive load of generating ideas for writing was substantially lessened and children were able to concentrate more on their phonics and handwriting; resulting in excellent achievement in those areas.

The data at the three collection points showed accelerated progress for all 10 focus children in 'Speaking over the second half of the year, after Colourful Semantics had been introduced.

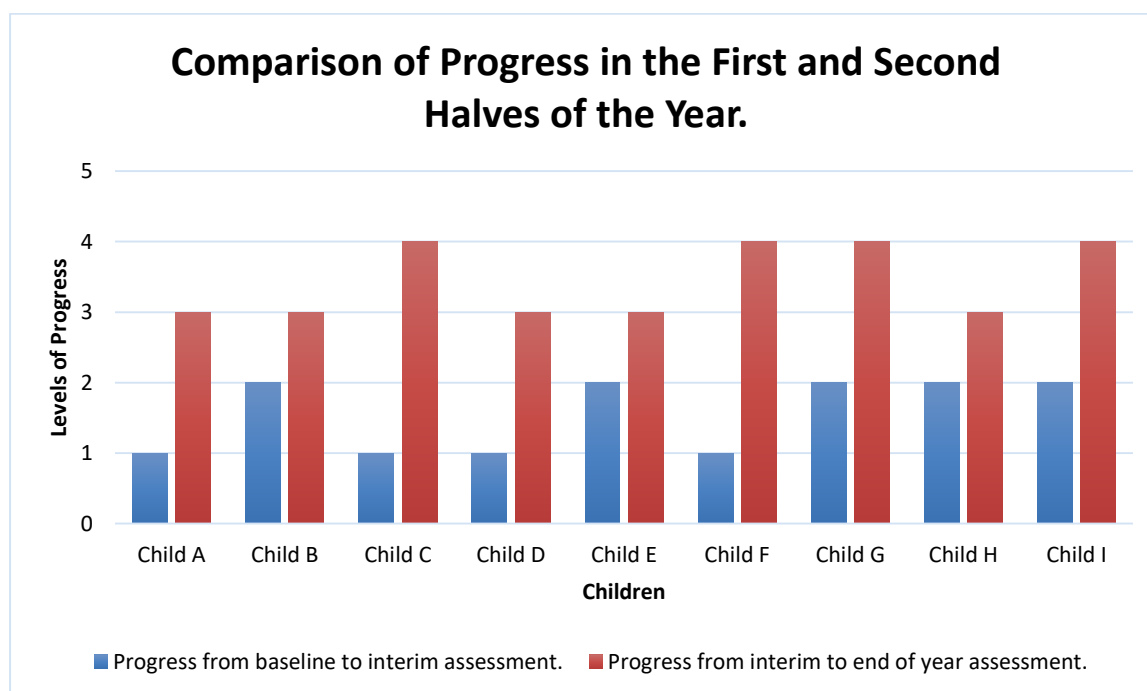
*Table 1 - Assessment and progress in CLL - Speaking over the first half of the year
(before the use of Colourful Semantics)*

CLL - Speaking	Baseline	Interim	Progress
Child A	30-50E	30-50D	1
Child B	30-50D	40-60E	2
Child C	30-50D	30-50S	1
Child D	30-50S	40-60E	1
Child E	30-50D	40-60E	2
Child F	30-50S	40-60E	1
Child G	30-50D	40-60E	2
Child H	30-50D	40-60E	2
Child I	30-50E	30-50S	2

Table 2 - Assessment and progress in CLL - Speaking over the second half of the year (during and after the use of Colourful Semantics)

CLL - Speaking	Interim	End of Year	Progress
Child A	30-50D	40-60D	3
Child B	40-60E	ELG	3
Child C	30-50S	ELG	4
Child D	40-60E	ELG	3
Child E	40-60E	ELG	3
Child F	40-60E	Ex	4
Child G	40-60E	Ex	4
Child H	40-60E	ELG	3
Child I	30-50S	ELG	4

Key:	E = Emerging	D = Developing	S = Secure	ELG = Early Learning Goal	Ex = Exceeding
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As children progressed in phonic knowledge and writing skill, the oral work in scaffolding sentences provided a strong foundation for the generation of ideas and more detailed, grammatically correct sentences. Children who had difficulties creating their own ideas or full sentences became more confident and eventually had no need of the sentence strips.

Although one child did not attain the expected level of development for the end of the year, this process highlighted his areas of need and supported him in becoming better able to match his response to the question. He progressed from referring to himself in the third person and being unable to understand or respond to specific question words appropriately to being able to answer 'who', 'what' and what-doing' questions appropriately with the use of the action to support his comprehension. All children gained confidence in speaking and responding to questions in a whole-class setting and participated more often in class discussions. The children who attained the ELG or exceeding level of development met all descriptors with the exception of questioning of their own accord and using tenses accurately, highlighted in purple, (Appendix 5).

Impact and Conclusion

There are many factors effecting the perception of attainment when dealing with the speech of very young children. Some of these include: settling in and shyness at the beginning of the year particularly for those children who are new to the setting and/or not accustomed to being away from their care-givers for any length of time; personality and social skills again, especially at the beginning of the year and before the teacher gets to know the child can impact teacher judgment. In addition, since no control group was used in this study, there is no data with which to compare the relative rates of progress. For these reasons, it is difficult to quantify precisely the impact of this approach other than to say progress was accelerated during the second half of the year and that the children's speech when responding to questions and generating sentences was assisted through use of Colourful Semantics' actions and colours.

Therefore, the study suggests that attainment in speaking can be accelerated through Colourful Semantics' systematic approach to scaffolding the manipulation of the basic parts of a sentence. Teacher knowledge and understanding of how to support progress in developing sentence structure improved as a consequence of this strategy as well. As a result of the research, Colourful Semantics has been shown to be beneficial for the accelerated progress of some of the least able learners and will be extended for use in the Nursery class next year.

In addition, following on from a further staff meeting from speech and language therapists on the use of Marion Blank's levels of questions, the progression and complexity of teacher questioning is currently being explored in Reception classes with a view to extend and deepen children's ability in comprehension and analysis (Appendix 4). Used in conjunction with Colourful Semantics, it would appear to provide a robust tool to support and challenge children's developing abilities.

References

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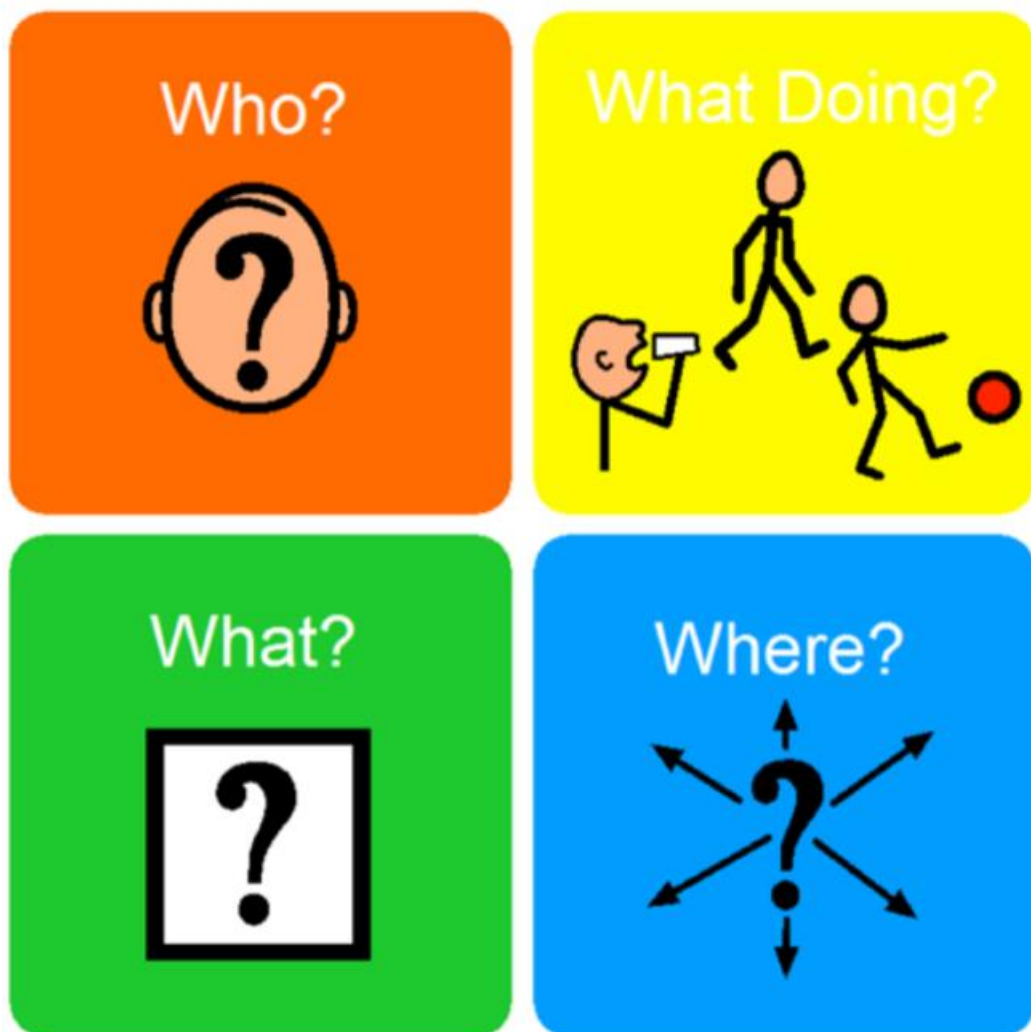
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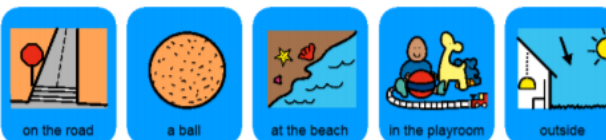
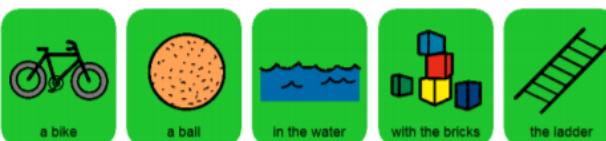
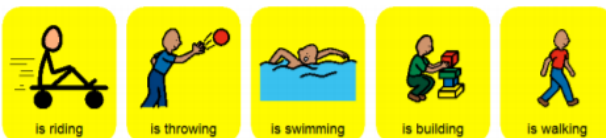
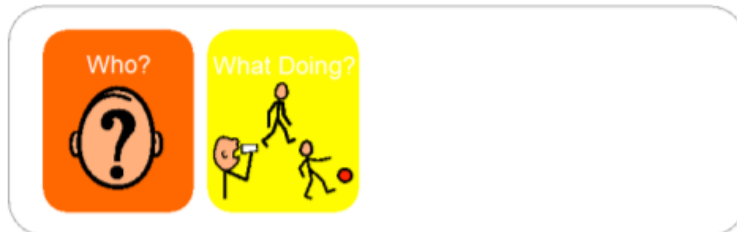
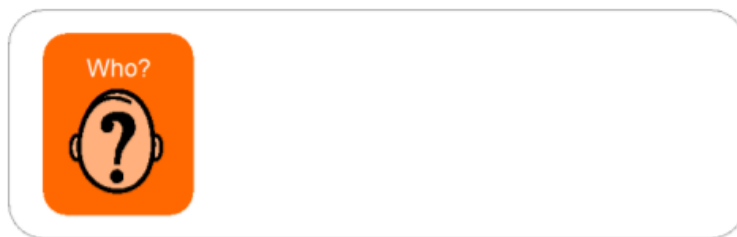
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Appendices

Appendix 1 First four stages of Colourful Semantics

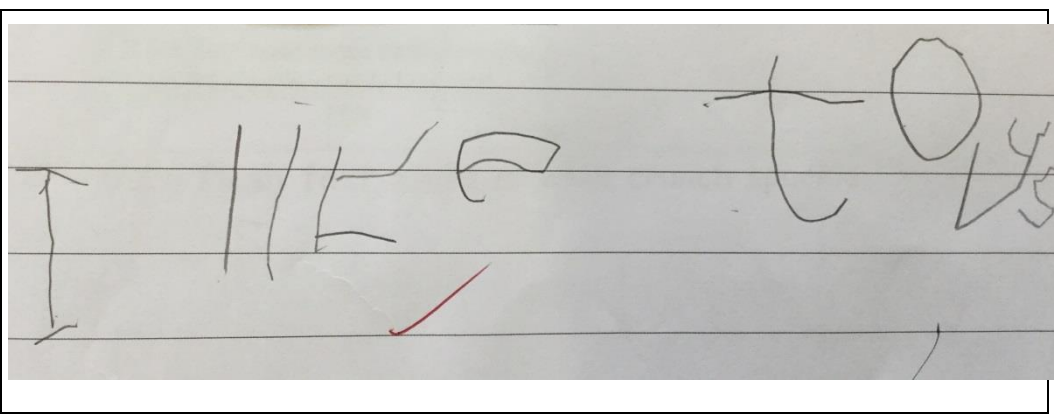
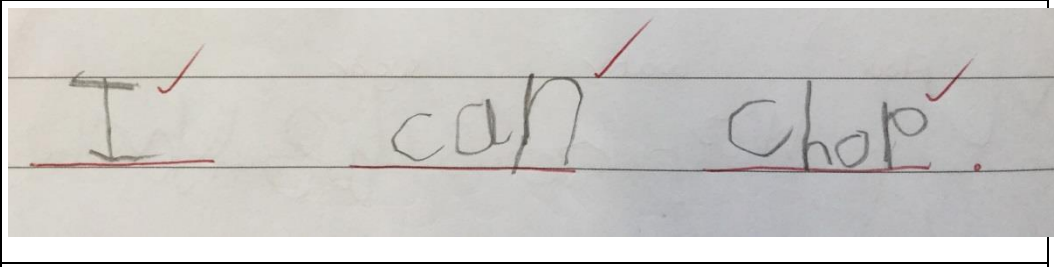
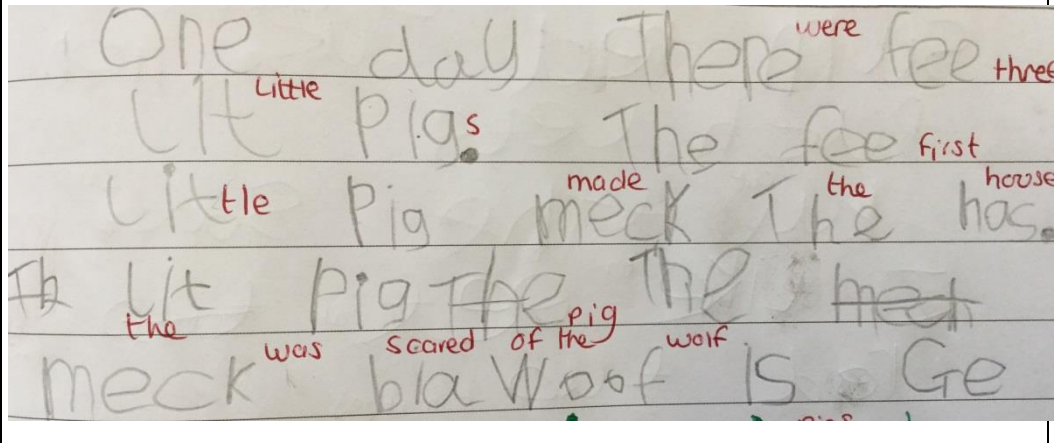


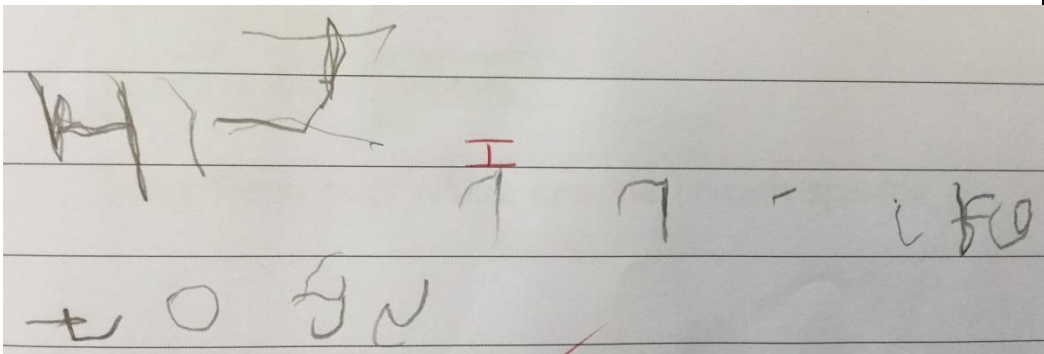
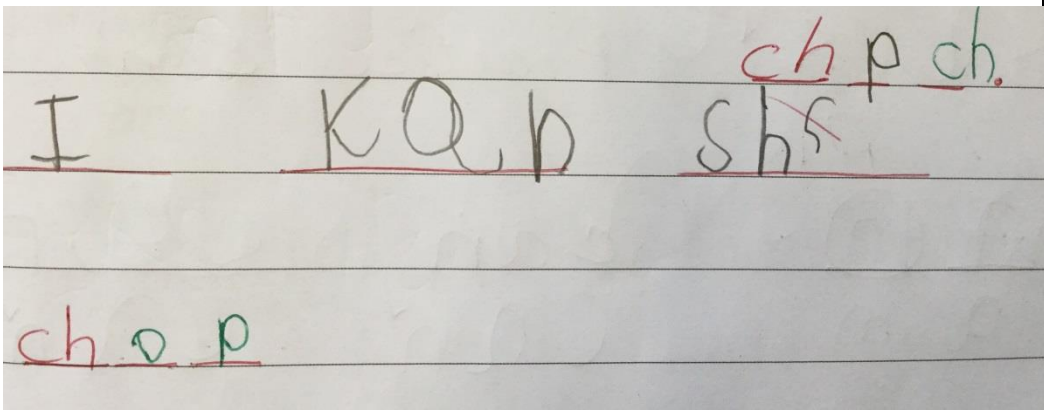
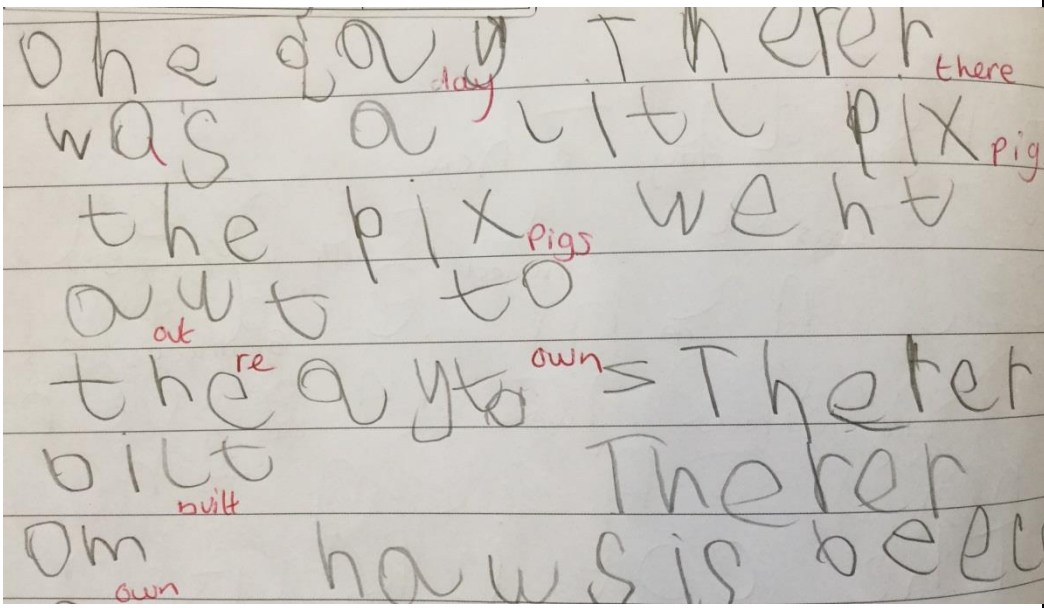
Appendix 2 Sample of scaffolds for 'silly sentence' activity

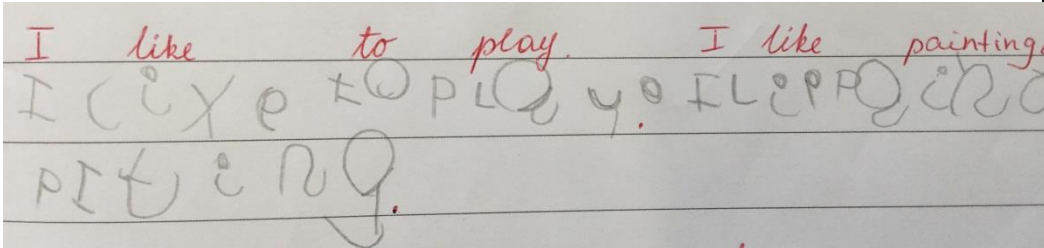
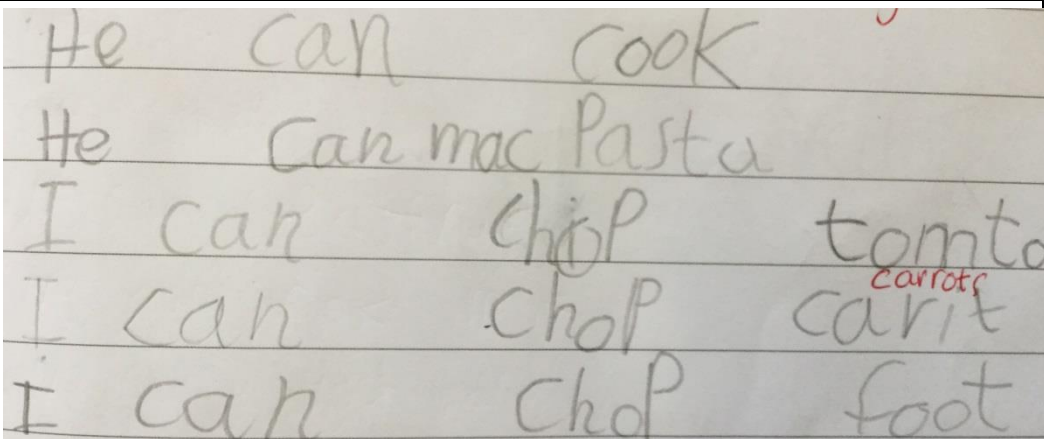
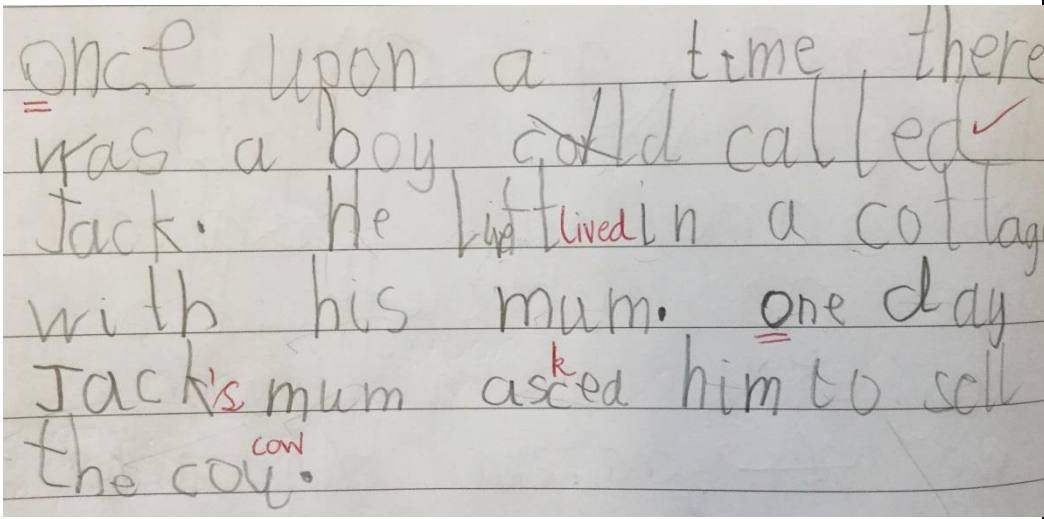


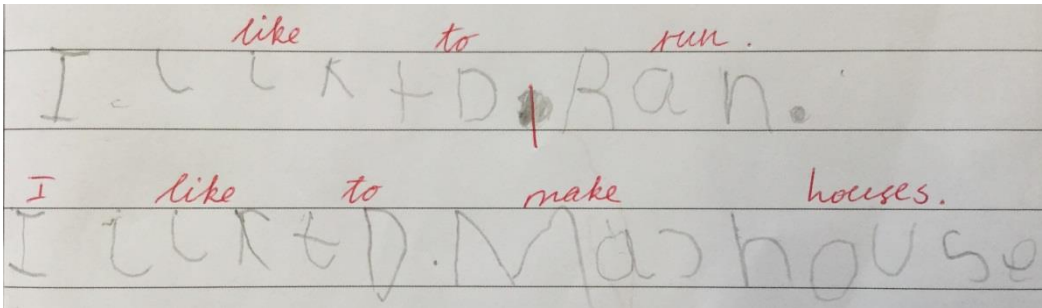
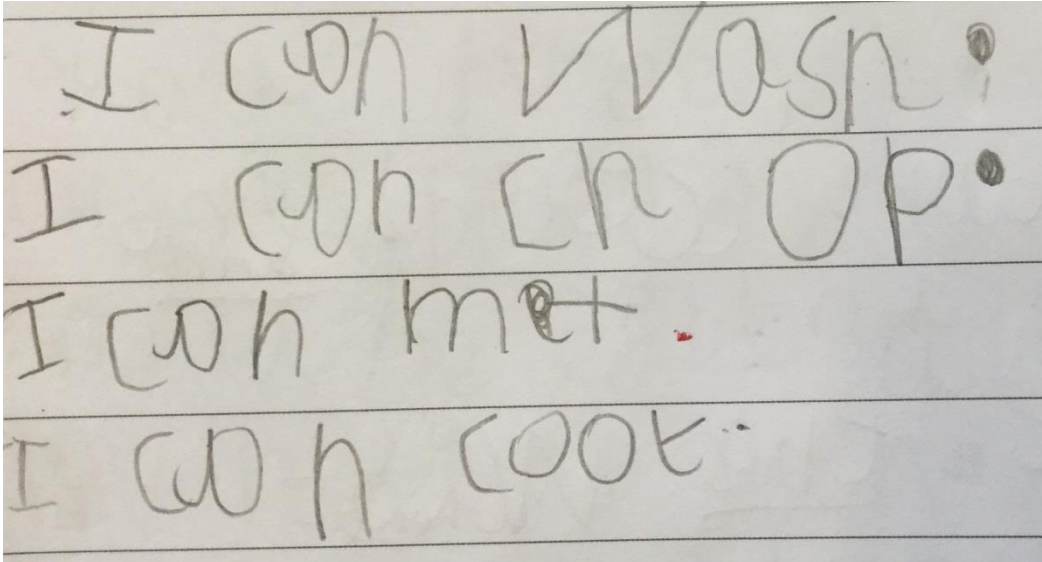
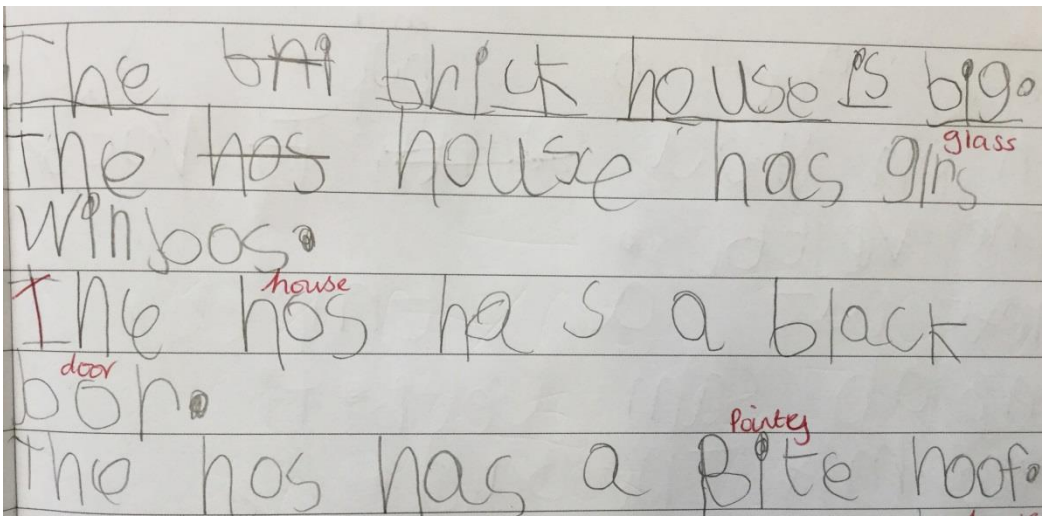
Appendix 3 Samples of children's work at baseline, interim and end of year data points

Child A

<p>Baseline</p> <p>(Sentences were scribed for children to copy.)</p>	
<p>Interim</p>	
<p>End of year</p>	

Child D	
Baseline (Sentences were scribed for children to copy.)	
Interim	
End of year	

Child G	
Baseline (Sentence s were scribed for children to copy.)	
Interim	
End of year	

Child I	
Baseline (Sentences were scribed for children to copy.)	
Interim	
End of year	

Appendix 4 Overview of Marion Blank's four levels of questions

Blank Level of Questions

Marion Blank studied the language used by teachers in the classroom. She found that there were four different levels of questions used. Basic questions ask for simple concrete information whereas more complex questions ask for abstract information.

Make sure the questions you use are at the level your child can understand. More difficult questions can be simplified or you can use the cueing techniques described overleaf to help the child respond.

These are the four levels and examples at each level are given on the following pages

1. **Matching perception - 'look at it'** - talking about objects that are present. Understanding of these questions develops at approximately 3 years of age.
2. **Selective analysis of perception - 'talk about it'** - talking about less obvious features of stimuli (objects, pictures etc.). Understanding of these questions develops at approximately 4 years of age.
3. **Reordering perception- 'think about it'** - talking about looking at objects in a variety of ways. Understanding of these questions develops at approximately 4.5 years of age.
4. **Reasoning about perception - 'reasoning'** - talking about what causes things to happen and make predications about future events based upon past experiences. Understanding of these questions begins to emerge at around 5 years of age and is continuing to develop at 6 years of age.

Ref: Compiled by Therapy Focus, based on Information by Marion Blank

Appendix 5 Progression in Speaking (Development Matters)

Speaking 30 – 50 Months	Speaking 40 – 60 Months	Speaking ELGs	Speaking Exceeding
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Beginning to use more complex sentences to link thoughts (e.g. using and, because). Can retell a simple past event in correct order (e.g. went downslide, hurt finger). Uses talk to connect ideas, explain what is happening and anticipate what might happen next, recall and relive past experiences. Questions why things happen and gives explanations. Asks e.g. who, what, when, how. Uses a range of tenses (e.g. play, playing, will play, played). Uses intonation, rhythm and phrasing to make the meaning clear to others. Uses vocabulary focused on objects and people that are of particular importance to them. Builds up vocabulary that reflects the breadth of their experiences. Uses talk in pretending that objects stand for something else in play, e.g. 'This box is my castle.' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extends vocabulary, especially by grouping and naming, exploring the meaning and sounds of new words. Uses language to imagine and recreate roles and experiences in play situations. Links statements and sticks to a main theme or intention Uses talk to organise, sequence and clarify thinking, ideas, feelings and events. Introduces a storyline or narrative into their play. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children express themselves effectively, showing awareness of listeners' needs. They use past, present and future forms accurately when talking about events that have happened or are to happen in the future. They develop their own narratives and explanations by connecting ideas or events. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children show some awareness of the listener by making changes to language and non-verbal features. They recount experiences and imagine possibilities, often connecting ideas. They use a range of vocabulary in imaginative ways to add information, express ideas or to explain or justify actions or events.