

# **How does the implementation of structured talk develop a child's ability to communicate verbally and in written forms?**

Southwold Primary School, Upper Phase

## **Abstract**

This study was designed to investigate how oracy skills could be improved within Key Stage Two. Class teachers planned and discretely taught verbal grammar based on common misconceptions heard across the school over a period of four half terms. The programme was designed to be responsive but with a clearly pitched core scaffold relating to age related curriculum content expectations. The title of these sessions, 'The Way We Talk', was designed to be inclusive of the children's understanding that the use of Standard English is important to written literacy. It also aimed to teach children context for talking; to know the formality of verbal communication changes depending on where they are and who they are with. All teachers involved in the study saw a positive impact in pupil written outcomes from their starting points.

## **Introduction**

Literacy is a multi-faceted subject with many elements: reading, writing and grammar, which are all taught discretely. All aspects of Literacy are closely intertwined and require a plethora of skills to be mastered for one to be a successful writer and speaker. Gaunt and Stott (2018) state that talking 'eloquently' is a fundamental life skill and correlates with success in later life. As practitioners, when planning and delivering lessons, teachers are required to identify the barriers to learning their class are met with every time they sit at an empty page. As practitioners, Upper Phase identified that the fluency of spoken English prevents children from writing in a range of styles and for a range of purposes; the children's use of grammar, as a result of their varying background contexts, was not Standard English. This particularly affects a child's conscious control to switch between formal and informal, limiting their ability to access

age-expected achievements. Despite an extensive and consistent coverage of grammar lessons (discrete and embedded) throughout their primary education, children default to their verbal understanding of grammar, rather than the application of what they are taught in writing lessons.

To explore the 'verbal habits' of the role at Southwold Primary School, an understanding of the school and the local demographic was needed. Southwold is a multi-cultural primary school situated beside an estate in Hackney, London. The proportion of pupils eligible for the pupil premium is higher than national average (13.6% according to DfE, January 2018). In addition to this, a significant number of children enter Nursery and Reception below the expected level for their age across a number of areas of learning. To add to this, the proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups and those who speak English as an additional language are much higher than the national average.

To reflect on our practice, Upper Phase discussed how these barriers to learning are addressed by what is already in place, for example how outstanding practitioners consistently address incorrect grammar in formal and informal settings to model Standard English. However, considering the diverse intake at Southwold Primary School, Upper Phase believed it would be beneficial to isolate the common misconceptions directly. Teachers were made aware of the misconceptions when engaging in colloquial conversation or listening to peer conversations. These 'verbal habits' were collated and discussed further.

To investigate a group of children were tracked across three half-terms with and data collection points identified to review the effectiveness of the initiative. It was expected that the outcome of the project would result in children evidencing greater precision in spoken and written Standard English through active selection of grammatical structures.

## Research Process

As a starting point, teachers developed a list of common mispronounced words or phrases that they commonly hear; this is both in a formal setting during the teacher’s input segment of a lesson as well as what has been overheard in colloquial conversations pupil to pupil. Following this professional dialogue, teachers each identified three focus children who were heard to use these errors more frequently. Although all children in the class would have access to this project, focus children made impact easier to track.

The National Curriculum (2014) states that ‘pupils should be *taught* to speak clearly’, therefore each class teacher created their own Flipchart (Fig. 1) targeted at the misconceptions over heard in their class to tailor the teaching. This resource became a working document whereby more examples and teaching points were added to it over time; it was discussed weekly in phase. The phase agreed that this would encourage teachers to consistently assess the pupils in their class and reflect on their class’s quality of Standard English. These sessions were taught during the first five minutes of one Literacy lesson per week, to embed this into the pre-existing ‘Grammar Starter’ system already in place. Teachers included this in their planning (Fig. 2) to ensure full coverage over the three half terms.

**Fig 1. Example of a stimulus for the sessions.**



**Fig 2. Sessions in planning**

<b>5 Minute Grammar Focus (discrete)</b>
The Way We Talk
Correct use of prepositions.
Overheard: 'Can I put it on/in the box?'

Teachers used a range of strategies to address misconceptions in ‘The Way We Talk’ sessions. For example, children were presented with a grammatically correct and incorrect sentence and discussions were encouraged to explain why they thought their

chosen answer was correct. These conversations were repeated throughout writing sessions and reflected in marking to ensure it was embedded in the pupil's writing process. These conversations fed into a larger dialogue throughout classrooms, whereby teachers corrected the incorrect use of Standard English. However, this built on discretely taught lessons. Pupils began to correct one another and themselves.

This foundation of understanding was also used in the editing process of written lessons, not just Literacy. Teachers began to use the concrete record of class conversations about grammar to refer to when asking children to proof read their work and edit.

## **Findings**

Teachers reported that children responded to 'The Way We Talk' sessions positively and that they were interested in learning more about contexts for talk. There were some indicators soon after introducing these sessions, that the children were internalising what they had learnt. For example, children began correcting one another and adults on their Standard English, children became more motivated to proof read their writing for grammatical errors and children's engagement with subsequent grammar sessions improved.

To enquire at a deeper level, during the phase meeting we looked at the quality of grammar in hot writes. Hot writes are a valuable assessment tool, used by teachers to assess each child's ability to apply what they have learned, over the course of a literacy unit, independently. Improvements were quickly recognised, through the increased use of green pen to correct grammar errors, particularly in relation to the misconceptions that had been addressed in the grammar sessions. Teachers furthered their scaffolding by encouraging children to read their work aloud to hear grammatical mistakes, applying their knowledge of Standard English to written work. Children showed that they were secure in modifying word order or inserting missing words to ensure a sentence made sense. Identifying the link between Standard English and their written work helped children become more independent editors of their own and other's work.

Teachers used assessment grids to provide an insight into whether children were emerging, developing or secure in meeting the assessment criteria for grammar in

their writing. The assessment grids showed that children were secure in varying the positions of clauses within sentences and editing grammar and punctuating to enhance effects and clarify meaning (Fig. 3). Expectations graduate throughout upper phase, however all year groups showed progress within this area.

Fig. 3 Year 5 example assessment grid

Grammar			
I can use relative clauses beginning with who, which, where, when, whose, that, or an omitted relative pronoun	9.10.18	6.02.19 12.03.19	11.06.19
I can use tense changes appropriately, consistently and accurately	19.11.18	6.03.19	24.04.19
I can use passive verbs to affect the presentation of information in a sentence	29.11.18	28.03.19	14.05.19
I can indicate degrees of possibility using adverbs e.g. perhaps, surely or modal verbs e.g. might, should, will, must	3.10.18	6.11.18	18.1.19
I can apply choice of noun or pronoun to avoid repetition	2.10.18	6.11.18	14.05.19

## Impact and Conclusion

The aim of the project was to investigate how discrete lessons on Standard English effect children's ability to communicate appropriately and use Standard English. The study received positive feedback from teachers, acknowledging it is useful to have a designated time to address misconceptions. It also encouraged teachers to listen carefully to how children speak and adjust their teaching to fit the needs of the demographic and dialects of where they teach. The children also gave positive feedback to the sessions, expressing that they feel more confident writing and editing their work. The progression of understanding is demonstrated in the findings; the children's understanding is demonstrated in their confidence. The confidence of the target children was particularly noticeable.

The project was easily facilitated. There was no additional preparation, due to grammar starters already being part of expectations. It fostered a culture of reflection amongst the teachers; asking why grammar was an issue amongst particular children. It also encouraged them to consider the whole child, rather than just their ability in writing. The phase was led into valuable professional dialogue around the 'cultural capital' of each child, as well as their other role models for language.

## References

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