

How can the use of standard forms of English be promoted throughout our school community?

Southwold Primary School, Lower Phase

Abstract

This project aimed to determine whether the use of standard forms of spoken English could be promoted with conscious effect by both adults and children within a primary school setting. For three half-terms, teachers delivered lesson starters which focussed on different but selected aspects of children's spoken English. They also sought to create a culture within their classrooms in which both children and adults were able to challenge non-standard forms of English which they encountered.

From comparison of start and end point pupil surveys, it was determined that children's understanding of grammatical concepts improved. Pupil age was not found to be a factor in increased survey scores; however, teacher subject knowledge and engagement were considered to have an impact on the success in each classroom.

Further iterations of the study would benefit from a greater initial focus on teachers' subject knowledge. A whole-school approach is recommended as this would provide greater opportunity to increase the subject knowledge and engagement of all adults, including teaching assistants, and would help to create a school-wide culture which could promote the use of standard forms of spoken English.

Introduction

Southwold School is a larger than average sized primary school situated in Hackney, London. The proportion of pupils eligible for the pupil premium is significantly higher than average. The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups and those who speak English as an additional language are also higher than national average.

With a variety of models of spoken English at home, as well as a wide range of languages spoken, communities can develop non-standard forms of English shared between adults and children. There can be a tendency for adults to not challenge

errors in spoken English for fear of appearing judgemental or culturally insensitive. Without a strong rationale to support adults in challenging these cultures, there is a danger that poor patterns of spoken language can become embedded within school communities. The School Development Plan identified developing 'oracy across all areas of the curriculum to enable confident communication for all pupils' as a target for the year 2018-2019, (Viridis, 2018).

Evidence suggests that despite achieving as well as their peers at GCSE level (EEF 2018), children from EAL communities are 'unequally subject to higher rates of unemployment', (NALDIC 2018). This can be partially attributed to the manner in which they communicate through their written and spoken English. In the period leading up to this project, learning walks and scrutinies had indicated that non-standard forms of English were being used, at times, by both adults and children around the school.

The intrinsic value of 'standard' English could be questioned, and in fact, is the home dialect of less than 15% of the population, (Trudgill, 1999). Standard English is defined as "a set of grammatical and lexical forms typically used in speech and writing by educated native speakers" (Trudgill, 1984). Williams (2007) states that Standard English has value as "the 'prestige' variety, widely used in education, in the media and in almost all forms of writing." Non-standard dialects are often viewed as "inferior and full of errors, 'bad' or 'incorrect' English' even among some speakers themselves." For many years the value of Standard English has been underestimated in schools, in fact, in 1975, the Bullock Report stated that, 'no child should be expected to cast off the language and culture of the home as he crosses the school threshold', (DES 1975). Upon the introduction of the national curriculum in 1989, it was noted that "if pupils do not have access to Standard English, many opportunities are closed to them in cultural activities, in further and higher education and in industry, commerce and the professions', (DES 1989). This led gradually to an increased focus on Standard English within the classroom. Recent cultural shifts, as well as higher numbers of non-native English speakers, particularly in London schools, have led to a level of media hostility towards a perceived lack of 'English' in English schools, (Evening Standard 2016, Telegraph 2014). There is now a danger that some teachers might feel uncomfortable about correcting children's spoken English due to concerns that they may be seen to be criticising children's cultures.

This study sought to examine whether standard forms of spoken English could be promoted throughout the school community, by establishing a project in which children had some ownership of the process, and which was delivered by teachers and teaching assistants working together. The aim was to create an environment in which all stakeholders were aware of the rationale behind the project and everyone felt able to challenge non-standard forms of spoken English. A start-point survey was conducted, spoken English sessions taught over a period of three half-terms, followed by an end-point survey and the collection of pupil-voice interviews. It was anticipated that the outcome of the project would be higher scores in the survey, as well as anecdotal evidence of more standard forms of English spoken by adults and children around the school.

Research Process

This project was co-ordinated by the phase leader and supported by five classroom teachers. All the children in lower phase (Years 1 to 3) were involved in the project, a total of over 140 children. Teachers initially met to discuss the project and to share the rationale behind it. They then recorded instances of incorrect spoken English within their classes for a period of two weeks. At the end of this period, the phase met and shared their observations. Ideas from the senior leadership team were also fed into this process to ensure that the project targeted areas considered most important to the school's development. A short list of questions were then developed which focussed on the most common errors in spoken English, (Appendix 1). These questions were then fed into an online application, to create a multiple-choice survey. This survey was undertaken by all the children in the phase to provide a baseline assessment of their skills in identifying standard forms of English.

At this point, the project was shared with the children, making it very clear that although they may speak how they choose with their friends and at home, at school they should speak using 'Standard English'. Children were made aware of the rationale behind the project, that this was about maximising their chances of good opportunities in their later lives, not about criticising anyone's culture or the way in which they speak at home. Class discussions about the project were encouraged throughout its implementation, with a view to creating a climate where everyone felt able to challenge incorrect forms of spoken English. The phase leader then prepared a series of

presentations covering the subject knowledge involved in the most common misconceptions. Through a series of lesson starters, teachers delivered sessions focussing on one aspect of spoken English each week. They were encouraged to involve their teaching assistants with modelling spoken English, with the aim that this would impact on the whole team, not just the children.

During the project, class teachers discussed their progress at least fortnightly during phase meetings. These meetings served as an opportunity to share best practice with others for scheduling, or encouraging pupil engagement. They also provided an opportunity to remind teachers to keep focus on the project. As the project developed, it was noted that it was challenging to engage teaching assistants with the project, partially due to timetabling issues, partially due to teachers feeling uncomfortable with being seen to criticise the language spoken by their colleagues. It also became clear that there were differences in the subject knowledge of the class teachers. To remedy this, the phase leader allocated time at each phase meeting to introduce the content for the following week.

At the end of the project, the children undertook another survey with identical questions to the start-point survey, and this data was compared to the baseline. Pupil interviews were also taken to measure their understanding of the project as well as their views on its impact.

Findings

There was an improvement in the number of children choosing the correct form of English across all the survey questions, (Table 1). In question 10, which involved the correct use of 'me' or 'I', the children made the least progress, despite a low starting score. There are two factors which might have influenced this. One is that the subject material was too challenging for young children, however, if this were the case, it might be expected that the score would be higher for the older children. As this is not supported by the data, it is likely that this misconception is so embedded throughout the local community that it is hard to overcome, and that teachers themselves need greater support in order to teach this material.

When broken down by class (Table 2), it becomes clear that most classes made good progress across all questions. The classes where the greatest progress was made

were the ones with the most experienced teachers. The class which made the least progress underwent a change of teacher mid-year. The data was also analysed by year group, and it was interesting to note that the older children did not make significantly more progress, as might be expected. Anecdotally, from conversations held during phase meetings, it is likely that other areas where children made limited progress are most likely due to gaps in teacher subject knowledge.

Table 1: A table showing the percentage of children choosing the correct form of standard English at the start and end of the project. The difference in the scores is also shown

		baseline	post-initiative	difference
Q2	"Please can I go to the toilet.	72%	93%	21%
Q3 playing outside yesterday. We were	64%	80%	17%
Q4	You could played with us. have	47%	69%	22%
Q5	Who did their homework? I did it	37%	66%	29%
Q6	Please can I? switch on the light	68%	98%	30%
Q7	We're going on the trip today, aren't we	45%	73%	28%
Q8	Yesterday to the park. I went	69%	85%	17%
Q9	You talking when it was my turn were	46%	74%	28%
Q10 are going on a trip. My class and I	18%	34%	16%

Table 2: A table showing the percentage of children choosing the correct form of standard English at the start and end of the project, broken down by class

	Class A	Class B	Class C	Class D	Class E	Class F
Q2 "Please can I go to the toilet.	68% 100% 32%	61% 100% 39%	68% 95% 27%	77% 96% 19%	80% 84% 4%	76% 85% 9%
Q3 playing outside yesterday. We were	58% 74% 16%	74% 81% 7%	36% 71% 35%	62% 84% 22%	68% 88% 20%	80% 81% 1%
Q4 You could played with us. have	53% 68% 16%	39% 81% 42%	59% 67% 8%	50% 81% 34%	28% 52% 24%	56% 63% 7%
Q5 Who did their homework? I did it	47% 74% 26%	17% 62% 44%	32% 48% 16%	46% 80% 34%	44% 76% 32%	36% 59% 23%
Q6 Please can I? switch on the li	74% 95% 21%	52% 100% 48%	50% 95% 45%	81% 96% 15%	76% 100% 24%	72% 100% 28%
Q7 We're going on the trip today, aren't we	53% 74% 21%	39% 92% 53%	32% 67% 35%	65% 80% 15%	48% 64% 16%	32% 59% 27%
Q8 Yesterday to the park. I went	63% 89% 26%	65% 88% 23%	73% 86% 13%	73% 88% 15%	72% 96% 24%	64% 67% 3%
Q9 You talking when it was m were	53% 74% 21%	43% 77% 33%	23% 62% 39%	58% 96% 38%	52% 72% 20%	44% 63% 19%
Q10 are going on a trip. My class and I	21% 32% 11%	17% 27% 10%	18% 24% 6%	27% 56% 29%	8% 32% 24%	16% 30% 14%

Pupil interviews indicated that most children had good awareness of Standard English and the project and its aims. They said that *'If you use Standard English then you can get a job where you need to speak properly,'* and, *'You can make sure that lots of different people, even old people, can understand you'*. Teachers in phase meetings also indicated that the project helped to improve their subject knowledge.

It became apparent that one of the main blockers to the project impacting the wider school community was teacher reluctance to involve teaching assistants in the teaching process. This was attributed to a level of concern about appearing to criticise their colleagues.

Another was time pressures. Teachers felt that they did not have enough time during the launch phase of the project to properly embed it, which also led to reduced impact on additional adults. Teacher feedback was that this prevented them from fully developing the culture in which standard forms of English were fully promoted, and in which adults and children felt they could challenge non-standard forms of Spoken English. It is to be noted that this is supported by pupil interviews in some classes in which children seemed less aware of the project and the rationale supporting it.

Impact and Conclusion

It is clear that explicit teaching and a classroom environment where there is a sustained focus on the use of correct forms of spoken English leads to children's improved knowledge of standard English. In this project, the data shows that there was an improvement in children's understanding in all classes. Most teachers also reported that project had improved their knowledge of forms of grammar, as well as how to explain more complex grammatical ideas to younger children.

The idea of creating an environment which fully promoted the development of standard forms of spoken English was less successful in some classes. Children and teachers' accounts show some variations in the success of this part of the initiative. Initial teacher conversations indicated some teachers' reluctance to correct children's spoken English, and the need to do so was discussed at length during phase meetings, however, it is likely that some resistance persisted. Increased phase leader focus and monitoring of this part of the project would have made this more consistent. For example, if the phase leader had held pupil interviews during the first few weeks,

classrooms where the project was not fully embedded could have been identified and the follow-up work completed.

Another potential area for improvement might have been the further development of teacher subject knowledge. An early focus on this area of the project might have led to greater impact on the confidence and competence of teachers to deliver the subject matter. Many of these teachers had not been taught standalone grammar at school and it was clear that at the start of the project, many did not feel confident to teach complex grammatical concepts to young children.

Given a further repeat of the study, it would be beneficial to consider the impact of whole-school implementation. Time could be set aside to deliver some of the subject knowledge at INSET to both teachers and teaching assistants, as well as ensuring that all adults understood the rationale behind the project and were fully-invested in its implementation.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – The survey questions used during the project

I am in...
a) Class A b) Class B c) Class C d) Class D e) Class E f) Class F
“Please can I...
a) go the toilet. b) go to the toilet. c) go toilet.
... playing outside yesterday.
a) We were b) We was
You could ... played with us.
a) of b) have
Who has completed their homework?
a) I done it b) I did it c) I donded it
Please can I ...?
a) on the light b) switch on the light c) open the light
We’re going on the trip today...?
a) ain’t we b) innit c) isn’t it d) arent’ we
Yesterday ... to the park.
a) I wented b) I goed c) I went d) I have went
You ... talking when it was my turn
a) was b) were
... are going on a trip.
a) Me and my class b) My class and me c) My class and I

Appendix 2 – Pupil interview transcripts

What does Standard English mean?

D) Standard English means when you talk properly and clearly so that people can understand what you are saying.

A) It means saying school words, for example not saying 'innit'.

Why is Standard English important?

D) Because if you use Standard English then you can get a job where you need to speak properly.

A) If you talk to your friends, and if they are younger than you, you can speak properly so they understand you. You can make sure that lots of different people, even old people can understand you.

What might help you to develop your use of Standard English?

A) I would like to do some small group practice.

D) You can practice using it at home as well as study using grammar apps at home

How do you feel when adults correct your English?

A) I would feel happy because they had told me the right way.

D) I would feel the same.