

# How does sign language impact communication development in EYFS?

Hoxton Garden School, EYFS

## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of sign language in Early Years classrooms in a mainstream primary school and to evaluate the impact on children's communication development. Using a whole class approach, the study followed the implementation of sign language over a structured timeframe. For ten weeks children received sign language sessions once a week delivered by our speech and language therapist. Class teachers incorporated new learning throughout the weekly timetable and ensured regular recap through application in context of the signs that had been previously taught. Children were taught how to incorporate these signs through their independent play to enhance peer to peer communication. Over time, empathy for the challenges peers may face when communicating was evident. Teachers identified that sign language provided accessible building blocks for some children to express their ideas and interact with others more readily. Teacher's also felt that pupil's with less developed communication had reduced frustration when communicating using core taught signs.

## Introduction

Hoxton Garden Primary School is a multi-cultural primary school situated in Hackney, London. The proportion of pupils who are eligible for the pupil premium is higher than average and a significant number of pupils enter nursery and reception below the expected level for their age across a number of areas of learning. The proportion of pupils from a minority ethnic group and those who speak English as an additional language are much higher than the national school averages.

One of the prime areas of the EYFS curriculum is communication and language. Children's development starts from birth and does not happen in isolation, relying on adult direction and influence. Parents and carers provide essential influence to development through feedback and modelling appropriate communication from birth in addition to the visual, auditory and kinaesthetic experiences children are exposed to.

In order for a child to meet their early learning goal by the end of Reception, it is expected that children demonstrate they can listen attentively in a range of situations. This includes listening to stories, accurately anticipating key events and responding to what they hear with relevant comments, questions or actions. It is important to recognise how complex this may be to a child who has not experienced effective communication from birth in facilitation or experience.

The visual cue of language creates a connection between early literacy for hearing and non-hearing children, Moses (2015). Sign language as a facilitator, is used with those children that are not at age related expectation or have the potential to not make progress from starting points. Children diagnosed with autism and global delay are able to communicate more freely and expressively with sign language, Mitchell (2005).

After examining baseline data (September) and Autumn data (December) for the communication and language strand, it was clear some children had yet to make expected progress. This is not an isolated problem. Gross analyses national data in her book 'Time to Talk' (2013) which shows a 58% rise in primary school children who have speech, language and communication needs as an identified type of special educational need (SEN). She identified that *"the ability to communicate – to say what you want to say and to understand what other people are saying – is fundamental to life chances."* In order to close the gap, the school invested in an intervention recommended by the school speech and language specialist (Makaton) and focused on a whole class approach to ensure the children that were unable to communicate effectively felt supported by adults and their peers.

A number of research studies shows that sign language speeds up speech development, reduces frustration in young children by giving them a means to express themselves before they know how to talk, increases parent-child bonding, and lets babies communicate vital information, such as if they are hurt or hungry. It is not yet fully understood how children learn language but psychologists emphasise the role of dialogue between a significant other and a child (Greg et al 2003). There are four main areas of language development which a child must

acquire; Phonology, semantics, syntax and pragmatics. It is expected that by the time the children are in Nursery they should have phonological awareness and sentences will have become more complex enabling them to express meanings in their language. It is with this in mind that it would be recommending that interventions should be put in place if this does not happen for some children.

The children that were identified as significantly behind in in communication and language were often displaying emotional or physical frustration when unable to communicate a want or need effectively. These barriers were causing an inability to self-regulate emotions with proportionality.

In order to develop communication systems, the whole class were taught sign language with a group of focus children tracked across ten weeks who also participated in additional sign sessions. Data analysis was identified to review the effectiveness of the sessions. It was expected that regular sessions of sign language would allow children to develop a way to communicate independently.

## Research Process

The research process was co-ordinated by the speech and language therapist and sessions were delivered by two classroom teachers and two Nursery Education Officers. All children in Reception were involved in the study; however 5 children were identified as focus children who were judged as likely to benefit most from the sign language sessions. The progress of the focus group was measured through baseline, interim data and end of term data as well as qualitative data in the form of pupil interviews. The phase leader led training to support in actively incorporating these sessions throughout the school day as well as revisiting accuracy in observing developmental fundamentals in communication and language development.

The implementation of these sessions happened over a series of weeks. The class teachers were trained by the speech and language therapist in how to support children to communicate through sign before the sessions began with the children. The sessions were slowly introduced by introducing one sign at a time. As the children became more competent the length of the sessions increased and these sign were modelled in various contexts. During Weeks 3 to 10, teachers delivered sessions 4 times a week for 5-10 minutes daily, recapping on previous learning each time. The session structure was consistent and included a single word, building a short sentence and asking for help. The phase leader also modelled these signs to the whole school to ensure that staff throughout the school are able to communicate with the focus children effectively.

Weekly phase meetings provided an opportunity for dialogue between the professionals who were undertaking the research project. This allowed essential time to share and discuss methods that were successful and those that were not as successful. The dialogues gave the professionals further support in developing ways to ensure children were using strategies taught independently.

## Findings

The data collected for the focus children demonstrates at least expected progress and in some cases more than expected progress, fig 1. The progression of statements which include speaking and listening were visited throughout weekly phase meetings and the evidence discussed for consistency in judgements. Children’s ability to give their attention to what others say and respond appropriately, while engaged in another activity was where the most rapid progress was made evident.

Key:	E = emerging	D = developing	S = secure	ELG = Early learning Goal
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Understanding			
	Baseline	Interim	End point
Child A	30-50 E	30-50 S	40-60 E
Child B	30-50 E	30-50 S	40-60 D
Child C	30-50 E	30-50 S	40-60 D
Child D	30-50 E	30-50 S	40-60 D
Child E	30-50 D	40- 60 E	ELG

Speaking			
	Baseline	Interim	End point
Child A	30-50 E	30-50 D	30-50 S
Child B	30-50 E	30-50 S	40-60 D
Child C	30-50 D	40-60 E	40-60 D
Child D	30-50 E	30-50 S	40-60 D
Child E	30-50 D	30-50 S	ELG

  

Listening and attention			
	Baseline	Interim	End point
Child A	30-50 E	30-50 D	30-50 S
Child B	30-50 E	30-50 S	40-60 D
Child C	30-50 E	40-60 E	40-60 D
Child D	30-50 E	30-50 S	40-60 E
Child E	30-50	40-60 E	ELG

*Fig 1. Data from baseline, interim assessment and end point*

The results from the children’s questionnaires and discussions with class teachers show that the implementation of these sessions were successful in changing confidence and empowering more active initiation of communication from children. Teacher interview outcomes identified that were a number of very quick noticeable differences in ways that children supported their peers. Class teachers fed back that the additional sessions throughout the week provided an opportunity for children to rehearse new sign learning and rehearse prior learning which resulted in more consistent use throughout independent play. The children became less reliant on adults to scaffold communication.

## Impact and Conclusion

Evidence concludes that the impact of implementing regular sign language sessions impact positively in pupil development in communication and language resulting in noticeable difference in assessment data. Although only one child out of the focus group met their ELG, expected progress was made from all starting points and in some cases accelerated progress. The evidence gathered from the pupil questionnaires and teacher interviews identifies the impact consistency had on changing expectation across the phase.

The findings that have been identified within this project conclude that the teaching and practise of sign language, if implemented effectively and continually, can change the attitudes of learning, self-esteem and behaviour of children throughout the whole school. Signs chosen could now be enhanced to separate operational communication and curriculum content to enhance understanding and confidence across all areas of learning.

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