

Sign posting

Can signing help hearing children to develop language quickly? *Michael Jones* reports on an innovative project in Luton, helping children's oral storytelling by teaching them British Sign Language

When I first started working as early language consultant for Luton's Every Child a Talker project, I watched a little girl singing to herself at the ARC Nursery and noticed that she was using what looked remarkably like signs from British Sign language (BSL). Could she have a hearing impairment?

When I asked the staff, they told me that theirs was a 'singing and signing' setting, and that all the staff used BSL when they were singing with the children. They also used signs as they spoke with the children, particularly with those who are very young.

Later I was astonished to see babies as young as 11 months old communicating their needs, wants and interests, such as 'more', 'no', 'hot' and 'dog', by using BSL. I knew that children and adults with hearing impairment use BSL, and that those with additional learning needs may be introduced to the Makaton sign system, but I had no idea that it was being used systematically with children with no apparent learning difficulties.

EXPRESS YOURSELF

As a natural sceptic, I was determined to find out if this was just a gimmick, or whether signing can support language learning. A quick sweep of the internet showed me that there are hundreds of organisations in the UK offering sign language classes for parents of very young children, and many make great claims for the value of signing.

The staff at ARC put me in touch with Katja O'Neill, the director of



Katja O'Neill takes part in a Sign A Story session with children at Dallow Children's Centre

Sign2Learn, an organisation that promotes signing with young children. Ms O'Neill had provided training for the staff and inspired them to use signing. She pointed me in the direction of research in the area of signing with hearing children.

One key text caught my imagination – *Dancing with words: signing for hearing children's literacy* by Marilyn Daniels. She found that sign language could be used to improve hearing children's English vocabulary, reading ability, spelling proficiency, self-esteem, and 'comfort with expressing emotions'. As this was exactly what we were trying to achieve through ECaT, it seemed natural to ask some of the other 19 settings in our project to experiment with signing and report back on their findings.

Many settings involved Ms O'Neill in staff training and singing and signing with the children, and were impressed by the children's responses. It was particularly noticeable that children learning English as an additional language were showing an improvement in involvement, vocabulary learning and understanding.

So why should signing have such an impact on children who hear well? Ms O'Neill says, 'Recent research suggests that when children use their voices to say a word, and their hands to sign it, they activate both sides of their brains, which can make learning far more effective. If a child forgets a new item of vocabulary, he can generally remember the sign, which prompts his brain to remember the word. So instead of the word being on the tip of his tongue, he has it at his fingertips!'

NEW DIRECTION

Many settings in Luton now use signing as a matter of course, but this is only half of the story. Sue Thomas, senior consultant for early years and childcare in Luton, who has responsibility for ECaT and communication, language and literacy development, met Ms O'Neill and signing in Luton took off in a whole new direction.

It is generally accepted that young children with rich vocabularies who are confident speakers go on to be effective learners in school. These children usually have an ability to tell a lengthy and interesting story, or recount a familiar tale, full of exciting sequencing words and phrases – such as first, next, until, after that and finally – and connectives, such as suddenly, fortunately and unfortunately. This 'narrative ability' is an important part of language development, and a vital foundation for creative writing.

There is an equally strong link between poor language skills at school entry and educational failure. Many practitioners have commented that children do not know any traditional tales, and certainly can't recount them to adults or other children. Ms Thomas and I, along with many teachers and early years practitioners, were therefore looking for ways to develop all children's narrative skills and vocabulary development.

Ms Thomas had been inspired by the work of storyteller Pie Corbett, particularly by his use of natural gesture to help children tell stories with a wider vocabulary and more detail. Pie Corbett encourages adults and children to use gestures to emphasise key points in

a story: words such as 'unfortunately' and 'suddenly', and connective words such as 'after that' and 'finally'. Using these words and phrases not only enables children to tell richer stories, but also helps them to recall the sequence of events in a story. This is essential for them to make sense of it, and to be able to convey a coherent sequence of ideas to a listener.

Ms Thomas and Ms O'Neill decided to investigate whether children could be taught actual BSL signs, rather than gestures, and whether this might help them to learn, remember and use some of those tricky but potentially exciting words and phrases.

'We aimed to research how signs from BSL would help children in nursery and reception build story telling and sequencing vocabulary,' says Ms Thomas. 'We were particularly interested in how those at risk of delay in communication would benefit. We chose BSL to ensure consistency with the signs that were being used throughout the schools, and to have a sign language that would be accessible to children who are using a signing system as part of their communication, such as those with hearing impairment.'

STORY TELLING

The initial pilot involved 78 children from nursery and reception classes in three schools, most of whom were under five years of age. The teachers assessed the children using the Early Years Foundation Stage Development Matters statements for Language for Communication, as well as Dispositions and Attitudes; 76 per cent of children were below age-related expectations in Language for Communication, and 72 per cent in Dispositions and Attitudes.



Over an eight-week period, Ms O'Neill visited each setting for 20 minutes per week. She told and signed along to two traditional tales – Goldilocks and the Three Bears for the first four sessions and the Gingerbread Man for the remaining four. The teachers were encouraged to tell the stories between visits, use the signs in daily interactions and encourage the children to use the signs themselves in storytelling. Ms O'Neill left a pack of small puppets representing the stories, and a set of line drawings of the signs so that the teachers could remember and use them.

When the children were reassessed at the end of the eight-week period, staff were amazed to find that now only 13 per cent were below age-related expectations in Language for Communication, and 21 per cent for Dispositions and Attitudes. That's around 60 per cent improvement in just eight weeks. The biggest improvement was for children learning English as an additional language.

Adults have been surprised at the speed with which the children started to use the new vocabulary. Michelle McLaughlin of Dallow Children's Centre recalls, 'I particularly noticed the children learning English as an additional language, who were initially reluctant to participate, are now standing in front of a large group to use signs and recall parts of the story or sing a song. Wahid, for example, did not communicate very much to begin with. After a few weeks of regular storytelling and signing he was almost shouting out the key words as well as making the signs. He likes to stand up in front of the group now to tell parts of the story. The children wanted to sing the songs and tell the story so much that we used a "storytelling crown" to let them take turns in telling the story, so everyone could be heard. It was so worth doing that I am planning to use BSL as much as possible every day.'

Following the success of the pilot study, several Luton schools are involved in a more detailed piece of action research, called 'Say it – Sign it – Remember it!' This involves using more detailed support materials, including a poster with storytelling signs for the classroom, finger puppet sets with individual stories and signs, and a DVD with signed stories for classroom use and adult training purposes. ■

Michael Jones is early language consultant for the Every Child a Talker projects in Luton, Bedford and Thurrock



- *Dancing with Words – Signing for hearing children's literacy* by Dr Marilyn Daniels, Talk for Writing
- For information about Pie Corbett's work, visit www.nationalstrategies.gov.uk/node/163270.
- For information about Every Child a Talker visit www.talk4meaning.co.uk

FURTHER INFORMATION

For a detailed account of this research, contact Sue Thomas, senior consultant, early years and childcare at susan.thomas@luton.gov.uk or Katja O'Neill of Sign2Learn at info@sign2learn.co.uk