

Introduction

Speechlink is an important initiative, now in many Kent schools. It is designed to empower and support schools in undertaking their own assessment and interventions in relation to speech impairments in primary school children. It gives a strong emphasis to the role of teaching assistants as key users of the resources and establishes the role of the speech and language therapist as facilitator of the programme rather than first call for assessment and intervention.

Speech impairment is an appropriate area in which to undertake this sort of initiative, given that research have consistently shown (e.g Law...) that intervention delivered by others than SLTs are at least no worse in their outcomes than those delivered by therapists.

The programme has maintained an ongoing research and development programme. The evaluations have suggested strong levels of satisfaction with Speechlink.

This evaluation

A small qualitative study by SENJIT at the Institute of Education, using telephone interviews, was undertaken with a group of Kent primary schools to check the programme's own evaluations of its success. The schools had typically identified about 25% of pupils as having special educational needs. The interviewees were either SENCOs or teaching assistants who had been trained to use the programme.

Initial assessment

Most schools used Speechlink as a class screening device. Typically reception groups were screened using it. With other groups being re-assessed this often meant that during an academic year the programme was being used with 30 or more pupils in a school.

It was universally agreed that Speechlink is valuable for initial assessment. 'There were no programmes available to do this before.' 'You can assess and know where to go' 'Intervention can go on. 'Using Speech Link helps to focus on problems, particularly when time is set aside in the week for the work.' Interviewees liked the way it was 'Programmed – you can see the progress – sounds more forward: blending that sound. Severe articulation problems – particularly helpful

Referral to speech and language therapy services

The relationship of the programme's introduction to schools' practices in referring children for speech and language assessment by a therapist was threefold.

First, interviewees felt generally that it had made a difference to the volume of their referrals to speech and language therapy services. These had generally

reduced somewhat, though some schools reported an increase in referrals when the programme was new to them. Perhaps the arrival of the package encouraged a concentration of attributions to this area.

Second, referrals were seen as 'better' by all. By this respondents seemed to mean that the referrals were now appropriate and not the result of, for example, their own or colleagues' over-anxiety about a child's speech. 'The ones that really need it get referred'. 'You can see improved referrals; we can see the problem.'

Third, the support of the Speechlink materials in targeting areas for action meant that the school could start work at once on a limited intervention programme with reasonable confidence that they were unlikely to be doing anything wrong and likely to be doing something helpful. 'You assess and know where to go.' This did not mean that SLT assessments were less valued: they could fine-tune the programme the school had been made a start on. 'You don't need to wait to begin intervention.' 'The TA knows what they're doing. No waiting for referrals to come through.' 'They are getting 'treatment' before the appointment.'

Judging pupils' progress

Most interviewees felt the Speechlink materials were useful for judging pupils' progress in expressive language. 'You can see the progress'. 'You reassess; you regularly re-assess.' In one case, though, the SENCO felt that the monitoring of children's speech could be done by other means. She and her colleagues did not try to use the package for that purpose so she could not comment.

Others thought it had improved the school's practice in this area all round. 'It has improved our whole approach: we are now more focussed, involved in close monitoring, looking and reviewing.'

Nationally, there is an issue about the extent to which teacher assessment data on Speaking and Listening is used to support the evaluation of medically-sourced interventions in this area. This approach would be particularly easy to use once pupils have been in the school for the whole of a Key Stage. One teacher commented that teacher assessment on Speaking and Listening would show the results of the programme in a most favourable light. But, teaching assistants generally did not seem to be involved in this type of assessment and so, naturally enough, relied on the opportunities for assessment of progress offered by the package itself.

Pupil progress

The respondents typically commented that most pupils made substantial progress when following Speechlink programmes.

One enthusiastic interviewee told us that seven children in her school had not needed any speech therapy at all to make dramatic progress in their speech. Other respondents were clear that this was not true of all of those they put on the programmes. There was a thread running through the responses that suggested that the 'purer' the expressive language impairment and the less

associated it was with other issues, the more likely it was that Speechlink would enable rapid improvement in the pupil's expression. 'It is particularly useful for severe articulation problems.' This, encouragingly, suggests Speechlink is doing the job for which it was created.

Has Speech Link affected individual and school practice?

individual

For individual teaching assistants Speechlink has been a very satisfactory programme to be involved in and has made a great difference to their practice. It represents an area into which they can invest time and energy in both formal and informal professional development (see below), and emerge with defined expertise and status. 'A TA can take the programme and run with it.' SENCOs recognise this: one told us that the school's work in this area had engaged the teaching assistants most happily.

School

There are generally three levels of 'permeation' for any SEN intervention in primary school practice:

- the individual pupil level where support from a teaching assistant may well not take the intervention beyond that pupil's immediate environment;
- the school-wide SEN practice level where an innovation is applied to targeted provision for a range of pupils with SEN;
- the school-wide curriculum planning level where many teachers are expected to utilise aspects of thinking ideas from the intervention in their practice.

To judge from the results of this evaluation, Speechlink is consistently operating at the second of those two levels (which might be said to incorporate the first). It is successful as a school-wide screening tool and allows a targeted approach to the learning needs of individuals with expressive language impairments. Speechlink does not often seem to be impacting on the overall curriculum of schools. Given its purpose, design and excellent results for individuals, there may be little reason to want it to address this level. But some respondents spoke of the programme's developing awareness across their institution and it was interesting to hear about one school, where, as a result of the head-teacher's commitment to developing work on speech and language, a much wider understanding, built round interventions including Speechlink, was worked into the curriculum across the school.

Professional Development

The design of the development programme by the Speechlink team incorporates substantial formal and informal professional development opportunities. Respondents implicitly indicated the success of all this provision by their appreciation of the great confidence that users in schools normally bring to the use of the intervention. This may be linked to another strongly-supported finding: that the resources are appropriately designed for the use of teaching assistants.

Professional development across institutions is an important consideration: the literature suggests that successful initiatives involve the creation of a 'community of learners'. This is often taken to suggest that an E discussion forum of some kind will be appreciated.

In fact such forums are often not that popular and, unsurprisingly, it would appear from respondents' comments that the one set up for the project is not hugely valued. It seems likely that other channels, such as the telephone, can be just as effective for creating communities of learning particularly when linked with face-to-face sessions. Some staff still do not feel comfortable with the E media. 'Not my thing' said one respondent firmly.

The video made to support training is well used and considered highly effective: 'Very supportive: seven steps of learning well explained. We have all seen it.' Others reported watching the video at home.

The project's website is equally popular with users reporting 'using the programmes on the site a good deal.'

It is probably true to say however that of all the professional development provision the most popular was the speech and language therapist. Respondents made clear how much they appreciated both the formal training and the less formal support and advice provided.

Relationship with speech and language services

Speechlink has opened up relationship between schools and SLT services. 'We have a good relationship & this helps the initiative's development.' 'We have lots more connections since Speech Link' One teacher attributed that to the increased knowledge gained from introducing Speechlink to the school. '[The relationship's] really positive, easier, I know what I'm talking about.'

One SENCO, though appreciative of Speechlink, was a little concerned that the relationship had changed between education and health in ways that were not entirely constructive overall. 'I find it interesting that within the school we allocated resources to Speechlink-our choice- educators and particularly teaching assistants...they seem to be taking on medical treatments.' This view was not shared by other respondents.

Ease of use of the Speech Link speech programmes

Respondents generally found the materials very straightforward to use. 'They are laid out step by step. All the resources are there.' They are laid out word for word with the resources and pictures.

They appreciated the upgrade which had made some things clearer. 'It's better since terms and vocabulary have been clarified.' They liked the range of options on offer, though one teacher would have liked more support with routes to follow if monitoring suggests that a pupil is not making progress. 'It's hard to adapt if you don't know the field'.

Response to Speechlink as a tool to facilitate the management of speech impaired pupils in the mainstream school.

Respondents confirmed the messages of the pages above. They felt that Speechlink was a well-designed, well-supported programme which did the job it was designed for, helped build bridges between schools and speech and language therapy services and supported inclusive mainstream practice on speech impairment.