

I CAN *Secondary Talk*

An evaluation over three years

Final report May 2015

Executive Summary

Speech, language and communication underpin cognitive, emotional and social development – not only in early childhood, but throughout school, adolescence and into adulthood.

Language and communication in secondary schools is often not seen as a priority, and recent curriculum and examination reform reflects this. Given the well evidenced link between good language skills and academic success this is of concern, particularly for the many students with poor language or speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).

I CAN *Secondary Talk* is a whole school programme, which builds staff confidence in supporting language and communication in young people and in identifying those with difficulties. The programme aims to improve pupils' behaviour and raise academic attainment, by focusing on language and communication.

In 2011, *Secondary Talk* was evaluated as having a significant impact on aspects of practice in the classroom. There were also indications from schools that the programme had an impact on students themselves. These changes noted after one year piloting the programme were exciting. And yet the evaluation yielded more questions:

- Are the changes sustained over a longer period of time?
- Does *Secondary Talk* initiate other changes at a whole school level?
- Does *Secondary Talk* impact on the language/communication, attainment and behavioural outcomes of young people?

At a time when changes to the curriculum mean a reduced focus on speaking and listening evidence of impact on learning for pupils is essential to ensure take up by schools. Equally, at a time of reduced spending for schools, demonstrating evidence of sustained impact is also important. This evaluation seeks to provide evidence to support both of these aspects.

In collaboration with Dr Judy Clegg, University of Sheffield, *Secondary Talk* was evaluated over a three year period using a mixed methods, repeated measures approach. Following groups of schools engaged in *Secondary Talk*, data in the form of interviews with senior leaders, lesson observations and pupil focus groups was collected at the end of each academic year from 2012 to 2014.

Running alongside this there was a small focused comparison study of groups of pupils in two schools: one implementing *Secondary Talk* and one not. A range of standardised tests and non standardised tasks was carried out with groups of students with varying levels of language over a three year period. Progress was compared across the two schools.

Headline findings

Spread and reach

- **Secondary Talk has continued to grow.** Over the course of the three years, *Secondary Talk* has been rolled out into 52 schools, representing a total of 48,908 pupils and a total of 4487 school staff.
- Over half of these (52%) are academies. There is a trend for smaller than average schools and higher than average numbers of pupils eligible for Free School Meals and of those identified with SEN.
- Seven of the original eleven schools interviewed in 2012 year engaged in repeat interviews showing **a continued engagement with Secondary Talk**. Six out of the seven schools reported sustained or increased impact.
- While most schools started in discrete areas of the school – a year group or subject area - the programme has grown to spread into more areas until in this third year it has become **embedded as ‘custom and practice’ in what schools do on a day to day basis**. At the end of year 3 **all schools interviewed reported that communication was in their development plan**.
- Through this evaluation there is now a good knowledge of how *Secondary Talk* develops in schools. **Recognition at senior leadership level is essential** in ensuring that the programme first spreads within schools, and then is sustained over time. Alongside this, it is important that staff have some **simple, well defined, tangible approaches** or resources to ‘hook’ *Secondary Talk* on to.
- The main barriers to its successful spread are identified as changes within school such as staff turnover, leadership change, or change in focus due to some external factor.

Impact on pupils

- Three years after they started *Secondary Talk*, schools report that they see a continued impact on **pupils’ learning, language/communication and behaviour**
- This is supported by more in-depth data collected from pupils in two schools in Derbyshire through a range of standardised assessments and tasks. **Progress is more substantial in the first year after Secondary Talk, after which it is sustained but levels off.**

Progress in language and communication

- Assessment on standardised language tests shows that after *Secondary Talk*, **students make statistically significant progress in aspects of understanding language and in expressing themselves**. This progress is not seen in students who attend a school not engaged in *Secondary Talk*.
- The fact that there is no change to students' underlying cognition (as measured by a test of working memory) suggests that progress in language may be related to engagement in a whole school programme.
- This progress is **most evident in students identified as having poor language skills** compared to those with typical language development or those with identified SLCN. Although these students do still make progress.
- Despite this progress, student across language groups remain behind their peers with typical language
- After one year, 6 out of 9 pupils in the intervention school (66%) moved into the average range for understanding and explaining word meanings (dropping to 5 in the second year). In the same school 8 out of 9 pupils (88%) moved into the average range in their ability to listen to and answer questions about a spoken text (dropping to 6 in the second year).
- Students use **significantly more word learning strategies following involvement in *Secondary Talk***. However, these do not in themselves necessarily help students to work out new word meanings. The study provides useful evidence for what might help them to use strategies more positively.

Progress in learning

- Analysis of attainment data, shows that students make **more progress after schools have implemented *Secondary Talk***, particularly in English as measured by school attainment data. This is as much as six times more than students in a school without *Secondary Talk*.
- *Secondary Talk* helps students to use **more positive strategies for learning**, and in particular for word learning. They use **more word learning strategies after involvement in *Secondary Talk***, and this difference is statistically significant. This may help to boost progress at school if students are given help to use strategies positively.

- After *Secondary Talk* students **are able to reflect on their performance more accurately**. They have improved meta-cognition, known to be important for learning. However, in areas of disadvantage they still tend to over-report their competence. This may be the result of poor language skills. *Secondary Talk* may be most beneficial to this group of students with poor language in areas of deprivation.

Progress in behaviour and social/emotional skills

- Schools see that understanding the link between communication and behaviour helps to ensure an appropriate approach to behaviour management.
- Schools' environments vary and this can impact on the way pupils can make use of supportive strategies.
- During Key Stage 3 peer relationships can be challenging for all pupils.

Impact on practice and whole school system change

- Two years after *Secondary Talk* there is **continued impact of *Secondary Talk*** on practice in schools and **a high impact on changes to staff knowledge**. This is reported by senior leaders, pupils and teachers. It is also observed in lessons
- Teachers in *Secondary Talk* lessons are clearer about what they can do to support pupils' speech, language and communication than teachers in non-*Secondary Talk* lessons. Teachers in *Secondary Talk* lessons use strategies and approaches **much more explicitly**, they **evaluate how effective they are**, and **encourage more active pupil involvement**.
- After three years **practice changes are sustained**, senior leaders are able to identify approaches and strategies that are well-embedded in school, but which originate from *Secondary Talk*
- Senior leaders report that ***Secondary Talk* is increasingly embedded within the school**, to the extent that it is not seen as a separate programme. There are changes at strategic level which ensure a focus on speech, language and communication. Some pupils can see these whole school changes.
- After three years, policy and practice change originating from *Secondary Talk*, has become 'business as usual', embedded in schools.

Conclusions and implications for practice

Implementing a whole school language programme, *Secondary Talk*, has a significant impact on students' language, with resultant impacts on their learning in secondary school. Students with poor language make most progress, narrowing the gap between them and their peers.

Significant impacts are seen one year after the programme starts, with progress sustained after this but levelling off.

These impacts are accompanied by specific, structured changes to teaching practice in which strategies are introduced, students are taught how to benefit from them and progress is monitored. Furthermore, as a result of *Secondary Talk* school systems change so that a whole school focus on language and communication is identified as a priority, and embedded as 'business as usual'.

A qualitative difference is seen in the language levels of pupils, and in teaching practice in a disadvantaged area compared with a school in a more affluent area. Although both student performance and practice change in the disadvantaged school, they do not catch up with their peers or colleagues in a more affluent school. *Secondary Talk* may potentially have a unique role in supporting students with poor language in disadvantaged areas.

Change characterises secondary schools – at practice and policy levels. In order to sustain development for protracted periods, schools may need regular 'refreshers' or 'prompts'.

There appear to be associations between language level, engagement, school demographics, culture and students approach to learning which would benefit from further investigation. There are indications that engagement in learning is not a stable concept during adolescence. The Government's 'character education' agenda will be helpful to see whether these traits can be changed.

Evaluating whole school language initiatives can be methodologically challenging and this project presents some useful solutions to these challenges. Evaluating a programme that grows in schools which themselves also change, means that it is important to include a range of measures. Standardised assessments are useful when accompanied by more tailored tasks and qualitative interview data. The use of self-report may be challenging for students who have poor language associated with deprivation. A skilled assessor, used to working with adolescents with language difficulties helps to gather accurate and comprehensive data