

P.25 Using Talking Books at home to encourage Speaking skills with a class of Year1/2 children.

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Aim

To investigate whether using Talking Books would lead to improved speaking skills.

Background

Sunnybrow Primary is a small rural school in the west of County Durham. The children are mainly drawn from a large council estate. There are a high proportion (48%) of children who are eligible for free school meals.

Speaking and listening skills had been identified as a whole school issue and has been the focus of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for the previous year. This was in response to an Ofsted report which stated that our children had "below average" communication skills on entry to school, "particularly with spoken language". Many children come to school lacking even very basic social language. Generally speaking, children have limited vocabulary and life experiences to draw upon in their everyday speech. Typically a child might present a treasured possession during 'Show and tell' accompanied by one word or sometimes none at all! Some children use only very basic language even in response to questions e.g. "It's a car" "I got it at the shops" "I play with it"

We have made changes to the way we plan for speaking and listening and teachers now focus on two particular aspects each half term. We have introduced many new resources to encourage speaking and listening skills. One such resource is the 'Talking Book' which has been used in our school for more than year. (Talking Books look like small photograph albums with a facility to record 10 seconds worth of speech on to each page)

Change in practice

The more I used Talking Books, the more uses I found for them. I found them invaluable as an aid in Literacy for telling stories, sequencing, instruction work, captions, making sentences, reports, the list could go on. In other curriculum areas they proved just as useful.

I incorporated Talking Books into my planning on a regular basis and found that I was using them much more than I had originally envisaged. When used in conjunction with a digital camera the children were provided with a visual and aural 'aide memoire'.

Colleagues have used Talking Books to good effect with SEN children who have particular difficulties with written work. Some older children have used Talking Books to make audio books about our school.

My children were well used to using Talking Books (they do require a little hand to eye co-ordination) in the classroom and I decided to investigate whether speaking skills in my class could be improved by sharing Talking Books at home with parents. My planned focus for the half term was to be speaking so this would complement our class work.

I reasoned that the children would be eager to show their parents the new equipment and that parents would be as eager to share the technology with their children. Also the Talking Books are easy to use. Compared with the laptops, which staff and children now regard as everyday technology, they are non-threatening and technically low key as there is very little to go wrong. I hoped that the fact that they were so accessible would encourage parents to join in with the project. An added bonus would be increased parental involvement with school.

Strategies

I wanted to be able to measure any discernible increase in speaking skills. Particularly I wanted to know whether the length and quality of utterance was improved. I asked my teaching assistant to count the words as uttered by selected children (a range of levels of confidence and ability) every time we had a show and tell session (two to three times a week). This was done, discreetly, for two weeks before the talking books were sent home.

I then explained to the children that everyone in the class was going to take the Talking Books home to use. They would have the use of the Talking Books over the weekend and should use the Talking Books to tell us about what they did over the weekend. The children were given some sheets of paper to insert into the pages and were told that they could use pictures, drawings and photographs to accompany their speaking as this was their normal practice at school.

A letter was sent home explaining to parents what the children were going to do with the Talking Books and inviting them to support their children when they were using the books.

Improvement in speaking skills.

The first group of children were eager to show their work to the class. They demonstrated what they had done by showing the page and then replaying their recorded message.

Confidence

The first difference, which was immediately apparent, was the increased confidence with which the children spoke on their Talking Books. I thought that this was probably due to the fact that the child was in their own home and not facing a group or class of children at school. Not only were the children keen to show off their work, many also wanted to explain the context for each picture. This supplementary explanation was a further development in their speaking skills and an unexpected bonus.

Length and quality of utterance

I counted the number of words in each utterance and compared it with the previous data we had collected. I found that the less confident speakers in the class were the ones who showed most increase in length of utterance. Again I thought that this was probably due to the fact that they were in their own homes and more relaxed about speaking.

I then listened carefully to what was actually said and found that when the children had time to think about what they said they were using longer, more complex sentences. This was especially apparent amongst the more able children in the class. Another difference which was apparent with some children was that they were speaking in a much more formal way, aware that their words were for an audience.

Organisation of speech

The children have a prop in the form of pictures, drawings, photographs and even small objects which they have placed in the Talking Book. This gives the children the confidence they need, a starting point, to begin speaking. It was obvious that some children who had found it difficult to organise their speech now had the necessary 'visual hook' and found that they could concentrate on what they were saying more easily. Another feature, which was used by some children, was the facility to re-record speech if they made a mess of the first attempt. I also realised that children were beginning to refine their speech. This was apparent in the choice of words and more formal turn of phrase.

Parental involvement

Many parents had obviously spent some time with their children helping them with collections of pictures and sometimes taking digital photographs. I spoke to some parents who were very impressed with the Talking Books and had thought of different ways in which they could be

used. All the parents I spoke to said how easy they were to use and what a good idea they were. Some suggested that they would be a good resource to use if a child was on holiday in school time or absent for a while.

Conclusion

Did the use of Talking Books encourage speaking skills?

I found that many children were motivated by the use of Talking Books in their own home. This encouraged them to speak, usually at greater length than before. This was most apparent in the group of least confident children. Other groups also showed an improvement. Some children with more or less average attainment in speaking showed use of more complex sentence structures. Two children in this group were more aware of their intended audience and spoke in a more formal manner.

Overall I felt that the experiment had been a success and that there was further scope for using Talking Books as a motivation to speak in the children's homes.

Future use

Thinking further ahead I could see the possibility of combining the use of digital cameras and Talking Books at home with a directed activity – "Make a report about your family" "Ask your Gran to tell you about holidays when she was little" "What did you do in the holidays" The children could take photographs

Parent involvement

I was very pleased with the level of parental involvement and interest in this project. Increasing parental involvement with the school is another ongoing whole school concern and I am keen to further develop the links which have been made in this area.