

USING THEATRE TO IMPROVE ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS' COMMUNICATION SKILLS: A FEASIBILITY TRIAL

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Abstract

Children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) grow up in an English-speaking country but use a language other than English at home (Murphy, 2014). It is often reported that children with EAL are behind their monolingual peers in terms of communication skills at the start of school. The gap between bilingual and monolingual children could be bridged through targeted intervention, but intervention research on this topic is limited. An underexplored medium that could be used in the context of an intervention focusing on communication skills is theatre. The present paper reports on a feasibility trial, conducted to gauge the potential of conducting an intervention that uses theatre as a medium for triggering an improvement in EAL learners' communication skills. The trial was carried out with ten 7- to 11-year-old EAL pupils in an Oxford primary school over the course of three weeks. Feasibility was assessed based on seven dimensions: recruitment capability, design procedures, social validity, practicality, integration, adaptability, and effectiveness. The findings suggested that the planned intervention has high recruitment capability, social validity, integration and effectiveness but requires amendments in terms of design procedures, practicality and adaptability. Moreover, its data collection procedures, implementation and generalisability should be assessed in a follow-up study, as the breakout of the pandemic and the present trial's protocol did not allow for their evaluation. Overall, conducting a feasibility trial proved to be a useful step towards the development of an intervention, and is recommended as a practice to education researchers working on similar projects.

Keywords: English as an Additional Language, Communication Skills, Theatre, Intervention, Feasibility.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. EAL Children's Communication Skills

Children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) grow up in an English-speaking country but use a language other than English at home (Murphy, 2014). The term 'EAL' is used in the British context, while other terms (e.g., 'English Second Language') are used to denote

the same concept elsewhere (Faitaki et al., 2022). Studies suggest that children with EAL comprise one fifth of the UK's primary school population (Strand et al., 2015). Yet, not all of these children are alike: some EAL learners are simultaneous bilinguals who acquire English and their home language at the same time; others are sequential bilinguals who start to learn English after their home language has developed (Murphy, 2014). As such, EAL learners are not a homogenous group, and their linguistic development is characterised by variability.

Despite their differences, children with EAL generally underperform relative to their English monolingual peers in terms of communication skills (Murphy et al., 2019; Whiteside et al., 2017). These skills are important, because children's oral language at the earliest stages of education is known to predict the acquisition of pivotal abilities, like learning to read, later on (Murphy et al., 2019). Likewise, communication skills can facilitate the children's social integration and allow them to express pastoral needs (Whiteside et al., 2016). The gap between EAL and monolingual pupils could be bridged through targeted intervention, but intervention research on this topic is extremely limited (for systematic reviews on the topic, see: Murphy & Unthiah, 2015; Oxley & De Cat, 2021).

The findings of the few available studies suggest that children's communication skills can be improved through the use of small-group theatre-based activities (e.g., Fricke & Millard, 2016; Price & Ansong, 2018). Yet, none of the intervention studies conducted to date use theatre as the primary means of improving oral language skills in children with EAL. This is surprising, because theatre makes use of a wide range of oral language skills and can be integrated into school curricula with ease – characteristics that make it a well-suited medium for an oral language intervention. With this observation in mind, we sought to develop an intervention to assess the effect of theatre on EAL children's oral language skills.

1.2. Feasibility Studies

An intervention like the one described above would be novel, expensive and difficult to implement. Therefore, proof-of-concept work is needed prior to its implementation. To this end, we decided to run a feasibility trial with the aim of gauging whether a theatre-based intervention can be done, how will it work and whether it is possible to implement (Gadke et al., 2021).

Gadke et al (2021) put forth a framework for determining the feasibility of a social science intervention. The framework involves ten dimensions: *recruitment capability* (assessing whether participants from the target population can be found), *data collection procedures* (evaluating if the procedures to collect data are suitable and the data collected can reflect changes in the participants' behaviour), *design procedures* (testing whether the research design is able to evaluate changes in behaviour), *social validity* (exploring if participants perceive the intervention as appropriate, fair, and effective), *practicality* (pinpointing whether the intervention can be implemented in the target context given the resources that are available), *integration* (assessing if the intervention is compatible with the target context's practices), *adaptability* (evaluating whether the intervention is flexible to accommodate the participants' diverse needs and characteristics), *implementation* (testing if professionals, such as teachers, can implement the intervention with fidelity), *effectiveness* (exploring whether the intervention has the potential to yield the intended changes in behaviour), and *generalisability* (pinpointing if the intervention procedures are applicable across settings, participants and timepoints).

1.3. Focus & Research Questions

Gadke et al (2021) suggest that researchers who conduct a feasibility trial do not have to assess all ten dimensions; instead, they should choose which ones are important in their context. Following this suggestion, and after looking at other interventions on the same topic (e.g., Price & Ansong, 2018), we decided to focus on seven out of the ten areas: recruitment capability, design procedures, social validity, practicality, integration, adaptability, and effectiveness. These areas were chosen because they would allow us to determine if an intervention that uses a novel medium with a diverse population in a specific context would be possible to run and whether it can improve children's communication skills.

It should be noted that our initial plan involved also assessing our data collection procedures, but the project was interrupted due to the pandemic – preventing us to carry out the intervention as planned. Moreover, we decided against evaluating the intervention's implementation and generalisability in this trial; the two dimensions would involve third parties (e.g., teachers) administering the intervention in varied settings, with diverse populations and/or at multiple timepoints. This task which would require us to standardise our materials – a process that requires careful evaluation in its own right, and one that we were not equipped to engage in in the context of this project.

Given the above, the trial aimed to answer the following Research Questions (RQs):

1. Can an adequate number of EAL pupils be located, signed up and retained?
2. Is the research design sensitive enough to pick up changes in the children's oral language and communication skills over the course of the intervention?
3. How do the different stakeholders (i.e., pupils, parents, teachers, and theatrical partners) respond to and engage with the project?
4. What resources are needed for the purpose of the project?
5. Can the intervention be integrated in a local school context with ease?
6. Does the intervention accommodate the EAL pupils' diverse cultural/linguistic needs?
7. Is there a development in students' linguistic and communication skills?

2. METHODS

2.1. Participants

After receiving ethical approval for the project, our first task was to find a school where we could deliver the trial. The first school that was contacted agreed to participate. Although we explained that the project was open to both EAL and monolingual pupils, the headteacher asked us to limit participation to EAL pupils in order to cover the school's needs.

Upon agreement, the headteacher sent out recruitment letters and consent forms to the parents of eligible EAL pupils in the school. This process resulted in twelve children (three boys and nine girls) between seven- and eleven-years-old being signed up. However, after the first session, three children (two of the boys and one girl) pulled out; the remaining nine children were involved until the termination of the project.

The children had different home languages (Bengali, French, Hebrew, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, and Urdu). Four were 'new to English', as their families had emigrated to the UK at the start of the school year. The rest were in the UK since birth or, at least, from the start of formal education but, according to their teachers, they faced difficulties with English language and literacy skills. We confirmed that the children were typically developing but we were not able to collect data regarding the children's skills in their home languages.

2.2. Procedure

The trial was delivered as part of an after-school club. It involved the administration of eight two-hour sessions, which were designed in collaboration with a drama facilitator. The sessions involved a series of planned drama activities (exercises and improvisations), which the children completed under the guidance of the first author.

A research assistant was also present in the room in order to observe the children's language and behaviour throughout the session. In addition to general observation, two discussion opportunities were integrated in each session so as to closely monitor the development of the children's linguistic and communication skills. During the discussion (taking place at two timepoints, before the break and at the end of the session), the children were asked to sit in a circle and express their feelings and thoughts about the drama activities. The data collected as part of the discussion was also useful for triangulating the information obtained through observation.

The sessions were expected to culminate into a show, which would be performed in a local theatre as part of a children's theatre festival. The show would be created through the process of devising: first (session 1), we asked children to write a letter to their older self, which would form the basis of the script; then (sessions 2-5), we allowed children to improvise around the theme of 'letter from the past' in order to generate additional verbal and non-verbal content that could be added to the show; finally (sessions 6-8), we would ask children to rehearse the full showcase.

2.3. Evaluation

To assess the feasibility of the intervention, and answer our RQs, we evaluated each of the seven dimensions with systematic measures, presented in Table 1:

Table 1. Evaluation Measures for Each Intervention Dimension.

Dimension	Measure
Recruitment capability	Assessment of participation and attrition rates by the research team.
Design procedures	Evaluation of design procedures by the research team.
Social validity	(a) informal discussions with stakeholders and (b) observations of partner engagement.
Practicality	(a) informal discussions with theatre partners and (b) evaluation by the research team.
Integration	(a) informal discussions with school partners and (b) evaluation of integration issues by the research team.
Adaptability	(a) participant observation during workshops, (b) discussions with participants during the workshops, and (c) informal discussions with stakeholders.
Effectiveness	(a) participant observation during workshops and (b) discussions with participants during workshops.

3. RESULTS

Unfortunately, the trial was terminated after four weeks due to the breakout of coronavirus. Despite its premature termination, the project gave rise to interesting findings. Regarding RQ1, concerning recruitment capability, a quick search determined that finding members of the target population is not a difficult task, as the number of EAL learners attending local Oxford schools is high (Dixon, 2019). Moreover, schools in the area were eager to participate in the project. However, our trial established that, even though the intervention has high recruitment capability, it is also subject to high attrition – especially among boys who seem less eager to be part of a theatre club. This issue needs to be addressed in future renditions of the intervention.

Turning to RQ2, which focused on design procedures, the trial suggested that the qualitative measures that were used (i.e., participant observations and focus groups) provide rich data. However, we discovered that observation cannot be as reliable in the context of our project, which involves interactive theatre activities completed by multiple participants at the same time. Indeed, some of the participants' words and actions during the sessions went unnoticed. As such, we believe that alternative measures are needed to complement the observation data and to assess development in the children's oral language and communication skills.

The intervention fared well in terms of social validity (RQ3). The trial established that the theatre partners collaborated well with the researchers, and that the school was engaged throughout the process. Moreover, the parents were grateful for their children's participation, and the students were excited to attend the workshops as evidenced by their comments at the start and end of each workshop.

As far as practicality is concerned (RQ4), it became clear that a programme of structured theatre activities is needed. The exercises that were created in collaboration with the drama facilitator as part of the present trial were, for the most part, successful from the researchers' perspective and enjoyable from the participants' perspective. However, more activities are needed for the full-scale intervention, which is expected to span twelve (rather than eight) weeks. Furthermore, since the full-scale intervention is going to be delivered by teachers and not by drama facilitators as was the case in the trial, the programme of activities should be specified and a brief training session should be provided so as to familiarise the teachers with the intervention materials.

Regarding RQ5, concerning integration, the trial suggested that the human, time and space resources required for the intervention are within a standard school's capabilities. Indeed, many institutions run clubs for their students in after-school hours, and the theatre intervention we propose can be accommodated to this format. This format also prevents children from missing out on lesson content in the target language, making it appealing in the case of bilingual pupils who benefit from additional linguistic exposure. It should also be noted that the intervention can be administered in various locations within the school (as long as there is space for the participants to walk around and engage in groupwork), increasing its integration potential.

Turning to RQ6, the focus of which was on cultural and linguistic adaptability, some modifications are needed prior to the launch of the intervention. A major problem that we encountered in the trial was that the writing activity that was used to springboard the creation of the show did not work due to the children's young age and low proficiency. The children's characteristics coupled with the limited time available also made the plan to put on a show at the end of the project difficult. In addition to the show-related difficulties, we noted some

unforeseen cultural issues with the theatre activities that our drama facilitator created. These cultural issues will be taken into account in future developments of the intervention.

Promising findings emerged in relation to effectiveness (RQ7). In particular, some development was noted in terms of both linguistic and communication skills. By the termination of the project, we observed that the utterances children produced during the discussion activities had greater lexical variation and syntactic complexity. In addition, pupils who were less vocal at the start of the project appeared to be more eager to express their feelings and thoughts, while those who were more active became more compliant and collaborative during groupwork. These observations suggest that the intervention can produce the intended effects.

4. CONCLUSION

4.1. Overall Assessment

Although feasibility trials are not mainstream in social sciences research (Gadke et al., 2021), the findings of the present project highlight their usefulness: indeed, conducting a feasibility trial allowed us to determine that our proposed intervention can be done, as well as what modifications are needed in order to improve it prior to launching.

Following Gadke et al's (2021) framework, we were able to evaluate our intervention based on seven dimensions using specific procedures. The conclusions we drew regarding the intervention's feasibility are articulated in Table 2:

Table 2. Feasibility Assessment per Dimension.

Dimension	Feasibility
Recruitment capability	Good
Data collection procedures	No data available
Design procedures	Modifications needed
Social validity	Good
Practicality	Modifications needed
Integration	Good
Adaptability	Modifications needed
Implementation	No data available
Effectiveness	Good
Generalisability	No data available

4.2. Future Directions

Based on our findings, we believe that our theatre-based intervention is viable, but requires a few modifications in terms of its design procedures, practicality, and adaptability. Moreover, its data collection procedures, implementation and generalisability should be evaluated as part of a subsequent trial, as the present one was not designed to provide information regarding these dimensions.

The most important modification pertains to design procedures (and, to some extent, data collection procedures – albeit the latter were not evaluated in the present trial). We

suggest that quantitative measures are needed in order to provide a concrete estimate of development that the qualitative measures we had in place could not. The quantitative measures can include linguistic assessments (e.g., of verbal comprehension and/or productive vocabulary) and should be administered before the intervention (pre-test) and after the intervention (post-test) to provide evidence of progress in the children's linguistic abilities. To safeguard that the children's progress is due to the intervention and not extraneous factors, an age-matched control group (that does not take part in a theatre club) should be included. In addition to the quantitative measures, we suggest that a subsequent trial would benefit from including focus groups with the child participants during and after the intervention, so as to note their attitudes towards the intervention (rather than linguistic developments).

The trial also highlighted that additional workshop materials must be created. To ensure that the materials are sensitive to the children's cultural and linguistic needs, a steering group comprising parents and teachers will be invited to evaluate them prior to the start of the study. Co-developing the materials with stakeholders will allow us to create a practical and sustainable intervention (Chalmers, et al., 2021), that should also score high in terms of the implementation and generalisability criteria.

On a related note, we believe that putting on a performance (not least in an external venue) at the end of the project should not be in a full-scale research intervention. In line with the literature, we noticed that the prospect of a performance at the end of the project did motivate the children and sustained their enthusiasm (Serrurier-Zucker & Gobbé-Mévellec, 2014). However, we argue that focusing on developing a performance detracts attention from the gradual process of linguistic development that the intervention tries to achieve. To maintain the performance element (and its advantages), while also leaving more time for the drama activities, an open class could be organised at the end of the project instead.

Given the number and nature of the changes that should be made, we suggest that a second trial should be conducted prior to launching. As part of the second trial (which will function as a pilot for the intervention), we will create and evaluate the full extent of workshop materials and re-assess the intervention's feasibility, focusing on the three dimensions that we did not assess through this project and the three dimensions for which we established that modifications are needed. We also suggest that the administration of the pilot should be preceded by a systematic review of the literature on oral language interventions (specifically focusing on ones that use creative activities with EAL learners), which will show us the extent, strengths and limitations of previous work – thus allowing us to design a targeted intervention.

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