Supporting progress in literacy through universal and targeted language work in a KS2 classroom

Pip St.John
Language For Life Partnership

Allison Pickup *Language, Literacy and Communication, Avondale School, Darwen, Lancashire*

Rationale

My role as a specialist speech and language consultant teacher is to improve children's communicative competence and skills through educational approaches that promote communication, speaking, listening and literacy skills. I help create the necessary changes and catalysts to improve children's speaking and listening skills in order to underpin and promote effective understanding and comprehension. I aim to ensure that all children in schools are supported to communicate to the very best of their ability, and to support all staff within the school to provide the opportunity to "get it right" for every child, especially for those with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). In other words, my goal is to create communication-friendly mainstream school environments where children with language delays and disorders and specific language impairments are welcomed and encouraged.

The aim of my work is to develop children's confidence and participation in learning and to strengthen teacher confidence, knowledge and awareness of language to support their children's learning. The ultimate goals are that children with SLCN are provided with timely and appropriate identification and support for their needs; that parents are clear on what they can expect from SLCN; that appropriate tools, programmes and resources are put in place to support SLC policy in schools; and to facilitate effective partnership working with all school staff, parents and outside professionals. The Communication Trust (2013) 'A Generation Adrift' clearly advocates the case for speech, language and communication to take a central place in schools' policy and practice, an imperative that underpins all the work discussed here.

Embedded within the new curriculum (DfE 2013), SEND reforms (DfE and DfH 2014) and Teachers standards (DfE 2011) is the drive to improve the quality of teaching and performance in English, Mathematics and Science. Children's special educational needs are expected to be picked up early, with support quickly and routinely put in place; teachers and support staff required to have the knowledge, understanding and skills to provide the right support for children and young people who have SEN or are disabled, wherever they are (DfE and DfH 2014). Teachers "*should develop pupils' spoken language, reading, writing and vocabulary as integral aspects of the teaching of every subject. English is both a subject in its own right and the medium for teaching*" (DfE 2013 6.1 p 9).

Similarly, the DfE state that "*Pupils' acquisition and command of vocabulary is key to their learning and progress across the whole curriculum. Teachers should therefore develop vocabulary actively, building systematically on pupils' current knowledge. They should increase pupils' store of words in general; simultaneously, they should also make links between known and new vocabulary and discuss the shades of meaning in similar words. In this way, pupils expand the vocabulary choices that are available to them when they write. In addition, it is vital for pupils' comprehension that they understand the meanings of words they meet in their reading across all subjects*" (DfE 2013 6.4 p 12)

There is a clear association between social disadvantage early in life followed by later special needs and unemployment (Lindsay et al 2012, APPG 2013). The Communication Trust (2013)

present a complete outline of the evidence on why schools must focus on speech, language and communication skills both as a vehicle for learning, interaction and independence, and to support those who have SLCN. They clearly state how SLCN impacts on behaviour, literacy, learning and future employability and advocate the use of evidence-based teaching practice and interventions to embed language in the curriculum through the What Works database (TCT 2015).

Children from low-income families lag behind by nearly one year in vocabulary at school entry, with lags in language ability much larger than those for other cognitive skills (Walfogel and Washbrook 2010). Early identification and screening is important, extending teachers' understanding of language and communication (Snowling et al 2011 and Fricke et al 2013). The gap in vocabulary (the main indicator of young children's language skills) for children from disadvantaged backgrounds is relatively large for three year olds and even larger when the children are five (Dearden et al 2010). Duff et al (2015) state that infants with a delayed vocabulary development and a family history of language and literacy difficulties have an elevated risk of developing reading difficulties, although it is not a significantly reliable predictor of language outcomes if children are assessed too early. The link between early language development and language opportunities is furthermore embedded within the 'Read On: Get On' publication advocating the role of reading in unlocking a child's full potential. Similarly, reading provides one of the best routes out of poverty, as over one-third of the poorest children still leave primary school without being able to read (Save the Children 2014), which significantly disadvantages their future educational and employment potential.

Overview

Within each 'host' school in the Language For Life Partnership project there is an agreed commitment to embed speech, language and communication within the school development plan using an adapted version of the Worchester SLCN pathway (Worcester CC and Worcester PCT 2011). This ensures that all teaching and support staff are able to develop a foundation level of knowledge on the topic, in order to understand the centrality of language for all learning and attainment, and to recognise the importance of communication skills in children's overall social, emotional and academic attainment. Raising the teaching workforce awareness of SLCN and capacity to practically support children with SLCN in attainment and learning is done in a variety of ways: through in-service training, workshops and class based sessions agreed as part of the schools development /improvement plan (Appendix 1).

The three-level approach of universal, targeted and specialist work in the Language for Life Partnership has been developed to focus on and promote communication supportive environments ranging from whole school training to specialist SLCN work on an individual case-by-case basis (Appendix 2). The collaborative planning with the author,the school leadership team and lead communication professional in school maintains the high profile nature of language within the school. Specifically the purpose of developing curriculum word knowledge and narrative skills is to use them to enhance listening and reading comprehension. Vocabulary knowledge is the visible top of the learning 'iceberg' – it drives comprehension and underpins its success in spoken and written language. Schools commit to direct weekly timetabled sessions for the various intervention/ programmes developed in school as well as generalised principles, which feed into whole class quality first training. A range of TCT booklets and resources are signposted and used in schools including Universally Speaking, Don't Get Me Wrong and Top Tips for Talking.

The school commitment and engagement is also fostered through supporting and developing language screening procedures, including the Reception Project (which screens all children's language levels on entry and provide advice and resources to enhance the language learning in continuous provision); and an 'additionality' tracker for pupil premium and FSM children, making better use of data to narrow the gap for children with identified and /or suspected SLCN. To ensure sustainability it is essential to work closely with the SENCO, or another senior leader, to

enhance their personal professional skills and knowledge of SLCN as they take on the 'Communication Champion' role in their school.

Through bespoke training for staff on speech and language therapist (SALT) programmes; on-going support and monitoring in their delivery; language interventions for individuals and groups causing concern and for those who fail to attend SALT clinic, it lays the pathway for better outcomes for those children with identified SLCN and SEND. Liaison with the community speech and language therapists (SALTs) and/or independent SALTs is embedded in the whole school approach.

The Language for Life project is built upon a strong evidence base constantly mindful of the clearest correlations between deprivation and the vital language development that leads to reading (St.John 2011, St.John and Vance 2014). The task in every Language For Life school is to support and develop the children's speaking and listening, regardless of their starting point, to support the critical route to knowledge, creativity, confidence and enjoyment with reading and writing. Through raising language awareness across all the school staff, it builds sustainability for the systems and practice to continue to make learning fun!

Case study

Avondale School is a large two-form entry primary school in Blackburn with Darwen. The year 4 class involved in the case study was a class that hadn't made the expected progress from year 2 to year 4 in reading and writing, in many cases due to gaps in vocabulary and low comprehension levels.

This school received a range of training from the Language for Life 'menu' including whole staff training on Vocabulary Teaching and Learning (a morning session) and the development of Narrative (an afternoon session) linked to develop and aid children's comprehension of the spoken and then the written word.

The following steps were then:

- Children to be included in specific language groups were identified from on-going teachers progress reports and in house assessments as well as assessed using the British Picture Vocabulary Scale (BPVS see below) to identify any gaps in their receptive vocabulary across the school (St.John and Vance 2014).

- Selected support staff chosen to deliver language work were provided with more targeted training in the delivery of the Pre Teaching Vocabulary (PTV) Box work and the Black Sheep Speaking and Listening Through Narrative resources for children identified with weak receptive vocabulary and spoken/written narrative skills.

- Fortnightly support initially to demonstrate and then coach the staff in the delivery of the PTV box using curriculum topic words and then in the development of desk top picture/symbol supported word lists for class use. Finally, support was provided in using the Word Learning Score resource to measure retention and recall of the curriculum words taught.

- Fortnightly support and monitoring in the delivery of the Blacksheep Press From Oral to Written Narrative resources.

- Whole class PTV demonstration of the principles of pre-teaching vocabulary and making word knowledge maps (differentiated for higher, middle and lower ability pupils).

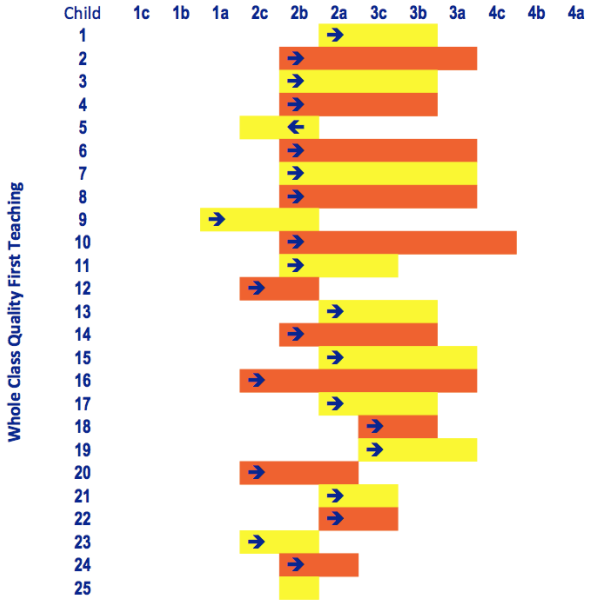
- In-class training of staff in the generalisation and use of the Black Sheep narrative approach to differentiate and support children's spoken and written language within the classroom.

Over the course of the year the children in this class had access to Pre Teaching Vocabulary sessions that were delivered to both the whole class and small groups. Writing was addressed through whole class and group sessions using the Blacksheep Narrative approach. Children with low comprehension levels were targeted through teaching the children inference skills during guided reading sessions.

Results

Table 1 show the overall progress for the year 4 class in their reading and comprehension results. The results show that over the year group many children achieved at least 2 sub levels progress or more.The results show that many in the class are now at the expected level for a year 4 child.

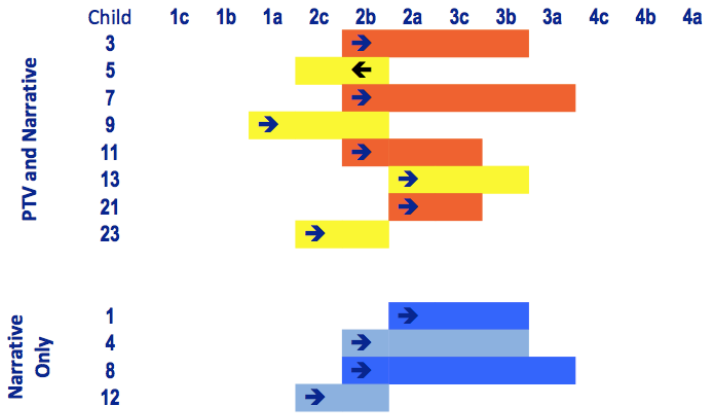
Table 1: Year 4 Reading and comprehension levels as measured by QCA Comprehension tests and the Holborn Reading Tests from Sept 2013 to July 2014



Nb. Arrow denotes direction of progress.

The improvements made by the children identified with SLCN and weak spoken narrative skills are displayed in Table 2. All the targeted year 4 children with only one exception made at least 2 sub-levels progress. Child 5 did not make progress over the year despite having targeted interventions. This child was then further assessed and diagnosed as dyslexic.

Table 2: Reading and comprehension levels of targeted children as measured by QCA Comprehension tests and the Holborn Reading Tests September 2013 to July 2014

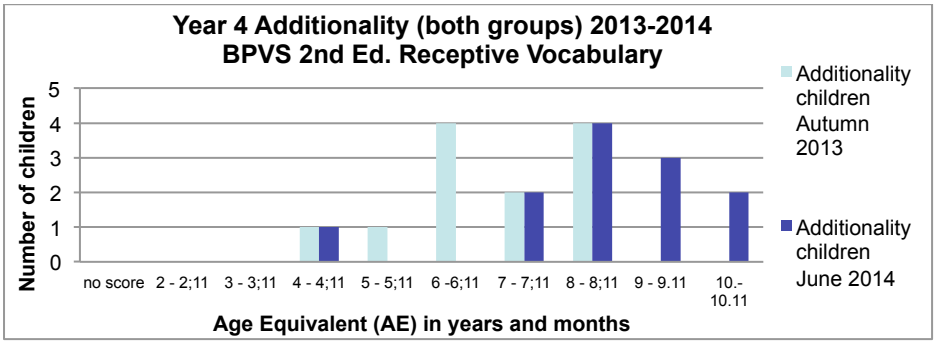


A further way to identify and measure progress for those children whose language skills are significantly below the level needed to access the curriculum is by using the BPVS (http://www.gl-assessment.co.uk). To access the receptive vocabulary age for each targeted child/cohort within the settings I work, I have continued to use the BPVS 2nd edition as this measures children's age equivalent starting from below 2.04 years whereas the more recent 3rd edition starts at an age equivalent of 3.09 years.

Many of the children with whom I work have not had the opportunity to hear and use context-reduced language (Cummins 2008) and the paucity of their vocabulary levels can often be measured / bench marked within that 14 months difference. The BPVS test involves the child listening to a spoken word and identifying the corresponding picture from a choice of 4 and the following measures may be used to measure impact across a specific period of time (St.John and Vance 2014).

The target group children were also assessed using the BPVS to measure their receptive vocabulary (Figure 1) and a Ratio Gain (Figure 2) calculated to measure impact.

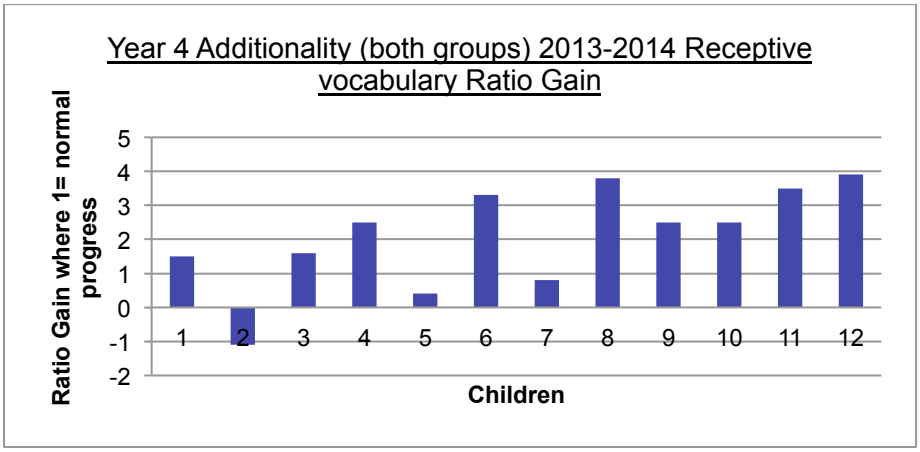
Figure 1: Receptive vocabulary levels of year 4 children from September 2013 to June 2014



A Ratio Gain (RG) is a group's or individual's average gain in reading, spelling or vocabulary age in months divided by the time between pre and post-test in months (Brookes 2007). A ratio gain can only be calculated where the test provides reading, spelling or vocabulary ages.
RGs of exactly 1.0 represent standard progress, or 'holding one's own'.

Anything above this represents better than standard progress while anything less may mean that the children are slipping (further) behind. RG's below 1.4, represent an impact that does not seem educationally significant in terms of narrowing the gap, *however* pupils did not just stay where they were, but did make some progress in absolute terms; but it was slow. They made little or no relative progress unless it is argued that 'holding their own' was a good result for such children – in other words, that without the intervention they would have fallen even further behind.

Figure 2: Ratio Gain for the receptive vocabulary of the year 4 children



During the forthcoming academic year the school has agreed to continue to deliver more of the same, to sign up again for the No-Pens-day-Wednesday event and continue to run Talk Boost groups

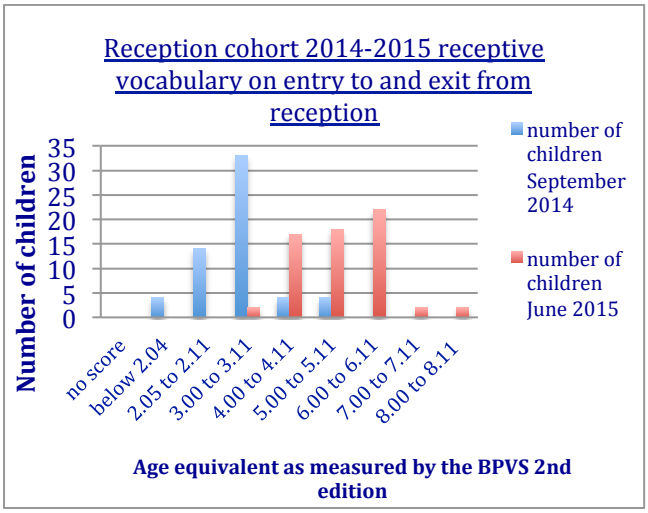
Finally

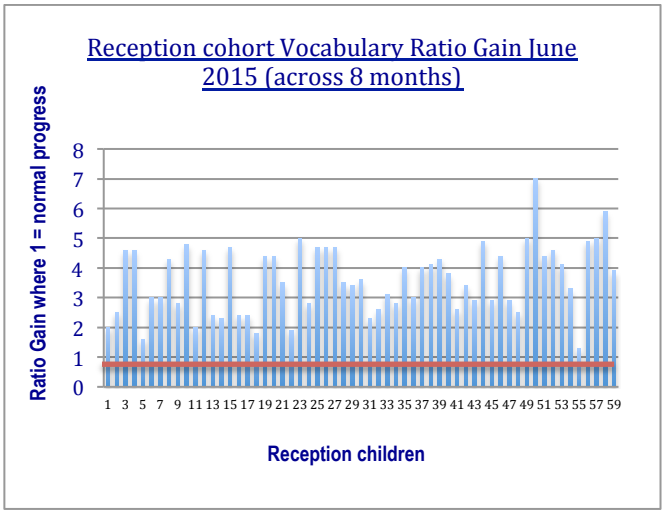
All the LfL schools measure the language levels on entry to the reception class and on exit using the Derbyshire language Scheme and BPVS 2nd edition. This is in order to identify the language levels of children entering the reception year, increase the knowledge and skills of teachers and support staff and to raise the language levels of all the children in the year group

Also, this approach allows staff to specifically target those children whose language skills are significantly below the level needed in order for them to access the curriculum and be provided with appropriate interventions. It also allows the identification of children whose language skills are well developed in order to ensure that they can be stretched to reach their full potential (St.John 2010).

Recent results in another LfL setting with predominantly children for who English is an additional language (EAL) showed an average Ratio Gain of three across the academic year 2014 to 2015. The continuous provision has been enhanced with PTV and narrative approaches both as whole class and group activities plus supplemented by ideas from TCT website and The Communication Cookbook. Those who are identified as having language delay or difficulties will access daily language sessions in year 1 (PTV/Black Sheep narrative programme) and/ or Talk Boost groups.

Figure 3 Reception cohort and impact of an enhanced language supportive environment





Within this year 4 class, as with the Language For Life Partnership schools, the aim is to improve children's communicative skills through cultivating a legacy of awareness and support to promote communication, speaking, listening and literacy skills. It is to create the catalysts to improve children's speaking and listening skills to underpin and promote effective understanding and comprehension and as the TCT (2013) so simply state:

"Supporting language and knowing when children are struggling is not hugely difficult; it's a 'tweak' to good practice, meshed with basic knowledge of language development." (p.5)

PTV resources can be accessed via:

- TCT What Works website http://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/projects/what-works
- Widgit website www.widgit.com/resources/literacy-language/vocabulary/pre-teaching-vocabulary/index.htm
- Blacksheep Press resources http://www.blacksheeppress.co.uk/products/narrative

Contact details:

Website: pipstjohn.co.uk
Email: pip@pipstjohn.co.uk
Twitter: @pipstjohn
Email: Allison.Pickup@avondale.blackburn.sch.uk

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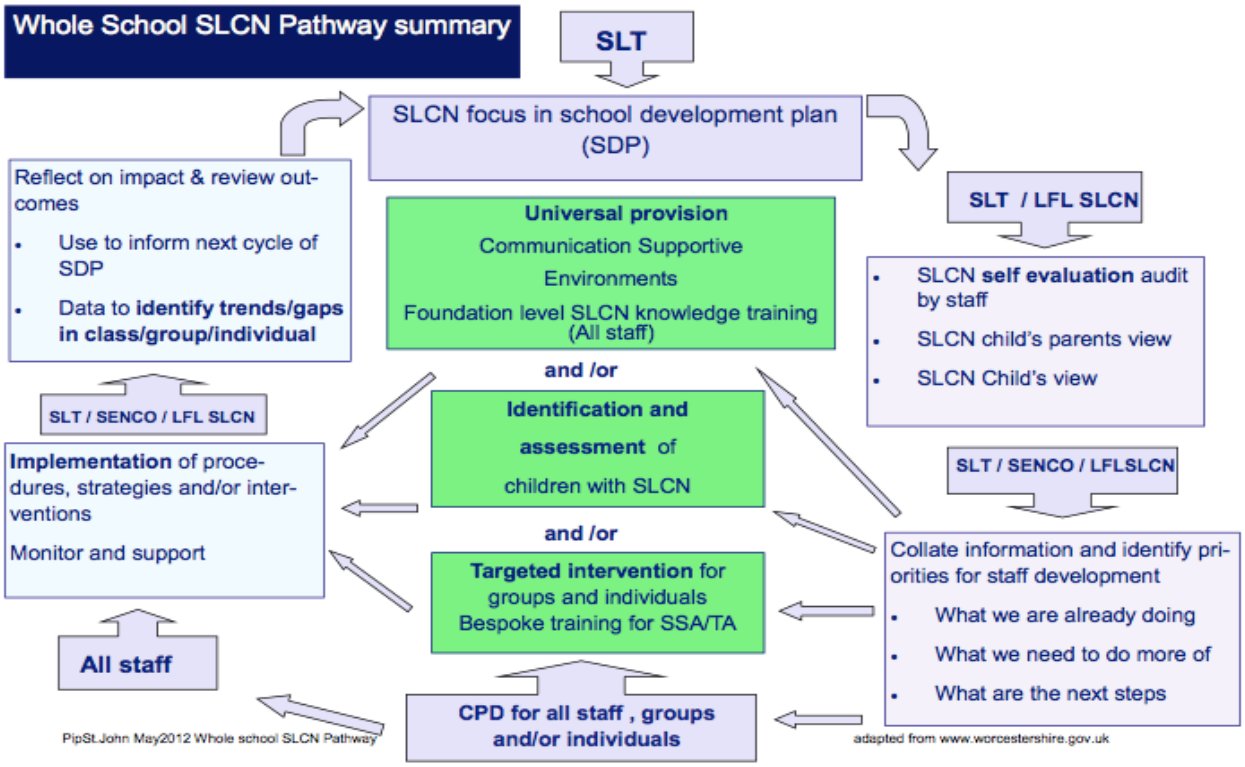
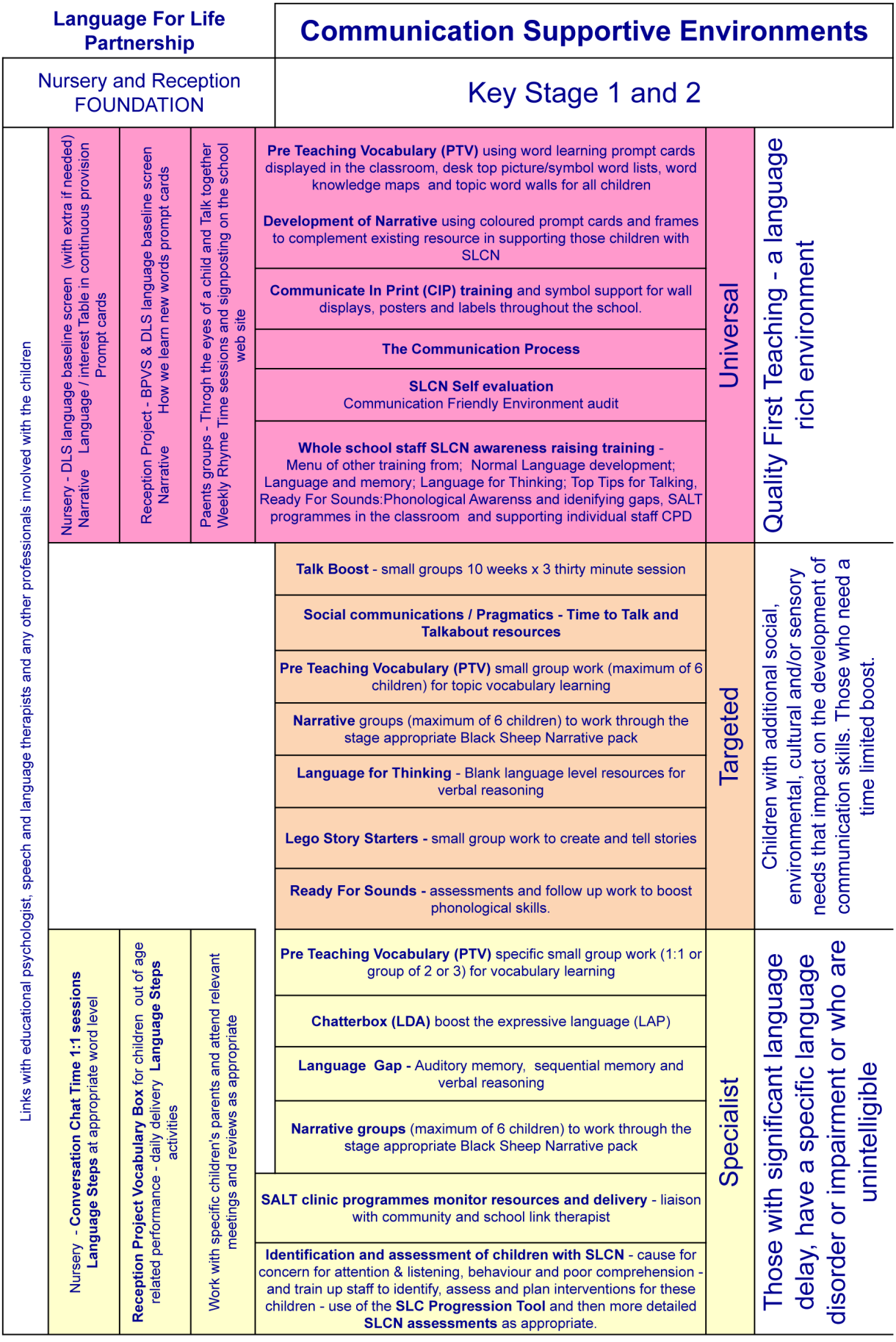
Appendix 1


Whole School SLCN Pathway summary
SLT
SLCN focus in school development plan (SDP)
Reflect on impact & review out-comes
Use to inform next cycle of SDP
Data to identify trends/gaps in class/group/individual
SLT / LFL SLCN
Universal provision
Communication Supportive Environments
Foundation level SLCN knowledge training (All staff)
SLCN self evaluation audit by staff
SLCN child's parents view
SLCN Child's view
and /or
SLT / SENCO / LFL SLCN
Identification and assessment of children with SLCN
SLT / SENCO / LFLSLCN
Implementation of proce-dures, strategies and/or inter-ventions
Monitor and support
and /or
Collate information and identify pri-orities for staff development
What we are already doing
What we need to do more of
What are the next steps
Targeted intervention for groups and individuals
Bespoke training for SSA/TA
All staff
CPD for all staff , groups and/or individuals
PipSt.John May2012 Whole school SLCN Pathway
adapted from www.worcestershire.gov.uk

Appendix 2


Language For Life Partnership
Communication Supportive Environments
Nursery and Reception FOUNDATION
Key Stage 1 and 2
Links with educational psychologist, speech and language therapists and any other professionals involved with the children
Nursery - DLS language baseline screen (with extra if needed) Narrative Language / interest Table in continuous provision Prompt cards
Reception Project - BPVS & DLS language baseline screen Narrative How we learn new words prompt cards
Paents groups - Throgh the eyes of a child and Talk together Weekly Rhyme Time sessions and signposting on the school web site
Pre Teaching Vocabulary (PTV) using word learning prompt cards displayed in the classroom, desk top picture/symbol word lists, word knowledge maps and topic word walls for all children
Development of Narrative using coloured prompt cards and frames to complement existing resource in supporting those children with SLCN
Communicate In Print (CIP) training and symbol support for wall displays, posters and labels throughout the school.
The Communication Process
SLCN Self evaluation
Communication Friendly Environment audit
Whole school staff SLCN awareness raising training - Menu of other training from; Normal Language development; Language and memory; Language for Thinking; Top Tips for Talking, Ready For Sounds:Phonological Awarenss and idenifying gaps, SALT programmes in the classroom and supporting individual staff CPD
Universal
Quality First Teaching - a language rich environment
Talk Boost - small groups 10 weeks x 3 thirty minute session
Social communications / Pragmatics - Time to Talk and Talkabout resources
Pre Teaching Vocabulary (PTV) small group work (maximum of 6 children) for topic vocabulary learning
Narrative groups (maximum of 6 children) to work through the stage appropriate Black Sheep Narrative pack
Language for Thinking - Blank language level resources for verbal reasoning
Lego Story Starters - small group work to create and tell stories
Ready For Sounds - assessments and follow up work to boost phonological skills.
Targeted
Children with additional social, environmental, cultural and/or sensory needs that impact on the development of communication skills. Those who need a time limited boost.
Nursery - Conversation Chat Time 1:1 sessions Language Steps at appropriate word level
Reception Project Vocabulary Box for children out of age related performance - daily delivery Language Steps activities
Work with specific children's parents and attend relevant meetings and reviews as appropriate
Pre Teaching Vocabulary (PTV) specific small group work (1:1 or group of 2 or 3) for vocabulary learning
Chatterbox (LDA) boost the expressive language (LAP)
Language Gap - Auditory memory, sequential memory and verbal reasoning
Narrative groups (maximum of 6 children) to work through the stage appropriate Black Sheep Narrative pack
SALT clinic programmes monitor resources and delivery - liaison with community and school link therapist
Identification and assessment of children with SLCN - cause for concern for attention & listening, behaviour and poor comprehension - and train up staff to identify, assess and plan interventions for these children - use of the SLC Progression Tool and then more detailed SLCN assessments as appropriate.
Specialist
Those with significant language delay, have a specific language disorder or impairment or who are unintelligible

Appendix 3

Language For Life Partnership Menu of training sessions for teaching and support staff		
Communication Friendly Environments ▪ Communication Commitment ▪ CSE audit	Normal Language Development Universally Speaking (TCT)	Speech and language (SALT) programmes in the classroom – register of children and monitor delivery/support staff
The Communication Process SSA / teachers training modular, ½ day or full day training	Pre Teaching Vocabulary (PTV) Universal Wave 1-overview In class work	Development of Narrative (Linked to BSP Speaking and Listening through Narrative) In class universal work
SLCN Awareness Raising	Pre Teaching Vocabulary (PTV) Universal Wave 3	Development of Narrative (Linked to BSP Speaking and Listening through Narrative) Targeted group work
Identification & assessment of SLCN and support in a mainstream classroom	Communicate In Print (CIP) training (Widgit)	Language and Memory
Language For Thinking Universal and targeted	Derbyshire Language Scheme (DLS) & language levels in the classroom	Talking with Children TCT Top Tips for Talking
Specific Language Impairment (SLI) and language disorders in the mainstream classroom	Senco / Inco training using receptive, expressive and social communications language assessments	LFL Reception Projects
Parent's workshops (TCT Through the eyes of a child) Reception induction sessions	Supporting staff CPD ▪ SLCN SEF ▪ SLCF universal ▪ Language courses	Social Communication Skills Groups 'Talkabout' assessment and resources
Talk Boost Wave 2	Inclusion Quality Mark award(IQM)	No-Pens-Day Wednesday TCT