

## The impact of symbol-supported vocabulary teaching

### Objectives

Rose Brooks, Advisory Teacher for the Babcock Communication and Interaction Team, led a research project in Devon primary schools as part of a PhD at Sheffield University, Health and Communication Sciences department to explore the impact of vocabulary teaching methods using symbols.

### Method

The research evaluated two methods of vocabulary teaching; traditional meaning-based instruction and a newer method that combines sound and meaning. Both approaches utilised visual symbols from Widgit Online.

### Approach

262 Year One children

26 Weeks

262 Year One children received whole class vocabulary instruction over 26 weeks, with testing before and after the programme, and four months after completion.

Teachers used a direct instruction method called the STAR approach to teach a word a day from a high quality storybook, accompanied by a visual image.



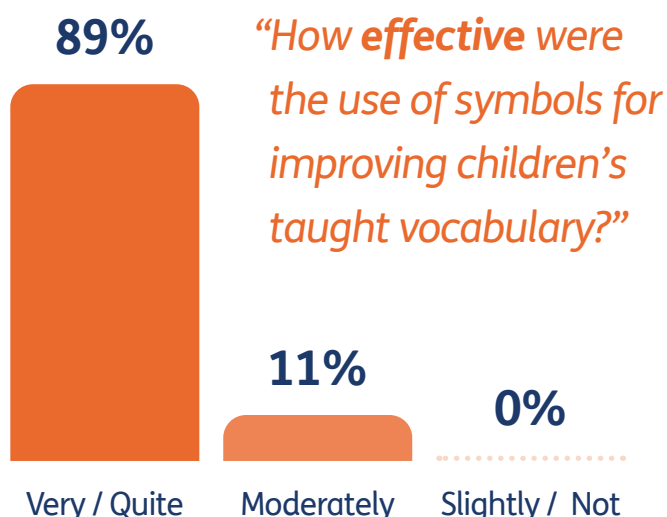
Tier 2 words (literacy and cross-curricular medium frequency words) were chosen due to their impact on curriculum attainment.

### Outcomes

Teacher survey results.

At the end of the 26 weeks all teachers who took part were asked to feed back on the outcomes of the project.

Figure 1



## The impact of symbol-supported vocabulary teaching

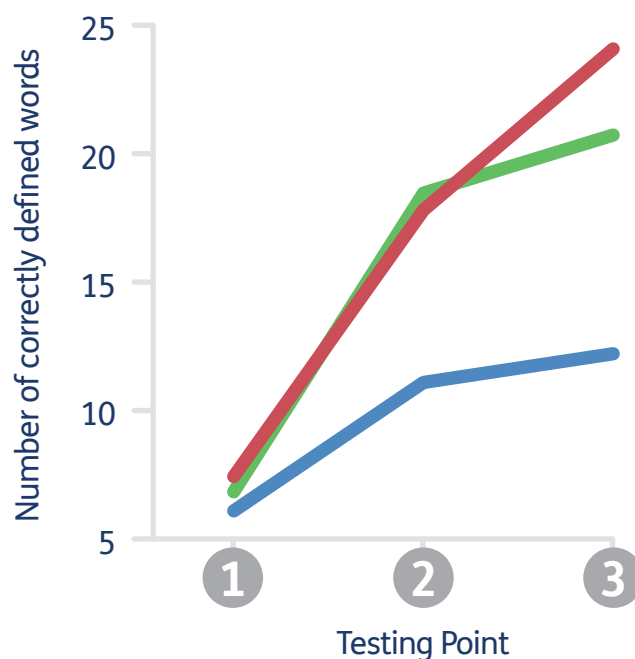
### Outcomes

Both groups achieved significantly higher results on taught vocabulary compared to the waiting control group without the vocabulary input (see Figure 2).

The size of the difference (effect size) between the teaching groups and controls was higher than one, representing more than a year of additional progress, according to the metric used by Education Endowment Fund (EEF).

Symbols may play a role in enhanced vocabulary attainment through their support for attention, engagement, understanding and memory.

Figure 2. Impact of vocabulary teaching methods



#### Combined group

Using sound, meaning and symbols.

#### Meaning group

Using meaning and symbols.

#### Control group

No additional input given to children.

- 1** **Sept 2018**  
Start of project, no specific teaching method has been applied.
- 2** **July 2019**  
End of the teaching program (26 weeks).
- 3** **Nov 2019**  
4 months after teaching program has been completed.

### Final observations

Teachers reported that using symbols improved recollection of oral vocabulary, even for Tier 2 abstract words.

The children responded positively to the symbols and said that they helped them to learn new words.