

Reflections on Podcasting

One year on, what do I think the children achieved through working on podcasts, more or less every week?

I was very pleased with the responses of each individual pupil, and broad targets I had set for each of them (such as to use words with at least three syllables, or to speak at a volume that was easily audible rather than a whisper) were met successfully within the context of working on the podcasts. Of course, this was by no means the only work aimed at helping them to improve their communication skills. Quite how much of the development of their skills over the year was due to the focus of this work is impossible to say. However, along with shifts in vocalisation and speaking that were observed, there were other developments of interest. Most of the pupils began to take a genuine interest in each other's use of language during these lessons, and everybody demonstrated an awareness of the need to remain quiet during recording, supporting each other in taking turns. There was also some reinforcement of ICT skills such as click and drag, selecting which podcasts to listen to or which chapter within single podcasts.

If we come to look at each pupil individually, we can explore the range of targets set out at the start of the year, and look at how far we came in meeting them.

- Nathan was set the target to use two keywords emerging from the discussion each week, aiming for adequately clear pronunciation of the words for them to be understood by somebody who hadn't worked with him that day. I feel that he achieved this on most occasions, often keen to speak the words very early on in the lesson. Perhaps the most satisfying development from our point of view was that Nathan steadily became more cooperative about speaking the words when it was his turn to record. In the early months Nathan would shout out his words or other comments when another pupil was being recorded, and would then clam up when asked to record his own part. This happened whether he was given the opportunity to go first or not. But as the year went on, and with the experience of two occasions where he didn't feature in the podcast because he hadn't chosen to speak when given his chance, he relaxed and appeared to genuinely value seeing the photos of himself and hearing his own speech when reviewing the last week's podcast. Nathan's own comments clearly reflect his enjoyment of the work and I love the fact that very early on in the year he picked up the word "podcast" and used it in relation to our lessons consistently.
- Jaspal was set the same target as Nathan, to produce a two word phrase with clear pronunciation of the chosen words. But unlike Nathan, Jaspal relies very strongly on the use of symbols to support him in producing his own speech, as without these he tends to repeat single words spoken by the adult. Jaspal is a very passive communicator, and although he can copy words and speech sounds fairly successfully he rarely initiates communication even with symbols, let alone spoken words. We were able to use the editing software to present Jaspal with his own voice speaking phrases of several words strung together, and he did seem to find this of interest, but the modelling didn't actually help him to move towards this in practice. Jaspal could successfully copy a single word with a good level of clarity, but when attempting to copy two words his speech would become less clear, or he might drop a syllable somewhere, making it harder to understand. I think that Jaspal's comments, chosen from symbols, sum up his feelings about our lessons quite succinctly - he knew we were working with "ICT", he knew it involved "talking", and his feeling about it was that it was "bad" and we should "stop".

- Katie is capable of speaking in full sentences and was able to demonstrate good understanding of the story each week. Her target was to maintain a consistent volume throughout her sentence, as she will often let it tail off to become almost inaudible, and for there to be no 'lost' sounds. The latter appears to happen in relation to Katie having a slight hearing loss. Our efforts here were therefore the same as for the other children; to carefully plan the sentence which Katie would speak, and for her to practice it several times before recording it, and even when recording to have several goes if she felt she had made a mistake, or needed more clarity. Over the course of the year Katie got on so well that we realised we were actually drifting away from her target, and were encouraging her to add new sentences at the moment of recording, just talking straight from the top of her head without practice. Whilst this produced some very engaging comments from her, it did risk losing the emphasis on drawing her attention to monitoring her own speech production. Fortunately, Katie was able to not only reflect on the elements which she had practised and which demonstrated her ability to achieve more comprehensible sentences, but she could also identify those sections where she spoke less clearly, and would describe some of the problems such as "mumbling" or "too fast".
- Vicky was to aim for single keywords of three syllables. She is capable of putting at least two words together, and each word might have two syllables, but her pronunciation of the sounds within the words tends to be very blurred and indistinct, so that unless you already know the topic being discussed it can be very difficult to understand what she says. With this in mind I wanted to target sticking to single words but really trying hard to shape the sounds into more distinct and recognisable elements. In the end, it seemed that we and Vicky had actually blurred our objectives and found our way towards trying to combine two or three words whilst still also trying to improve the clarity of the sounds within each word. I think this was partly a failing in my communication of the target with the support staff, but also my lack of recognition of just how much Vicky is motivated to communicate and that she really wasn't keen to be held back to perfect the ability to speak single words, when she had something to say that required several. In this respect Vicky definitely rose to the sense of having an audience for her work, and always loved seeing and hearing herself during the podcast, and would look around to catch someone's eye in the classroom and wanted to hear what everyone thought of her contribution. Her final comment on her Record of Achievement demonstrates that she understood our aims in the work when she says of her progress: "Speak more clearly".
- James shared his target with Nathan and Jaspal; to speak two keywords clearly. James absolutely loved this work, picking up on the label "Podcast" very quickly, and getting very interested in the stories chosen each week. Even before we had listened to the previous week's episode James would be making sure we had all remembered what it would be about by using many of the words he had practised for his part. He communicated in a very powerful way that forced at least the adults to engage with him and repeat and expand on the words he used. For James, a pupil who still needed to work on his long and short term memory, the podcasts provided a highly motivating context for him to recall stories, and there were several occasions when he would begin to talk about something that we had worked on more than a month ago, but because we had worked on the keywords with him we were able to recognise what he was saying. James is a very persistent communicator, and if you guess at the wrong word he will say 'no' and repeat the word until you get it right, and the example of his speech shown on the website in which he talks about the convicted nurse, Ben Geen, is a good example which came up again towards the end of the year, when James decided on what he wanted to

say on his Record of Achievement. It took us quite a while to realise what he was saying, but as soon as we did James happily confirmed that we had got it right. In terms of James' clarity of speech I would say that although our work did help him to improve, it was not to the point that a person who doesn't know him would readily understand his speech. However, he was most definitely articulating sounds with far more care than a year before, and chaining three or even four words together spontaneously where previously he needed encouragement to even put two together. In that sense, I feel that he made very significant progress.

- Nazia is very reluctant to communicate with adults around her, and when she does so she uses a very quiet voice with rapid speech. She will speak with her peers in a normal volume, often giggling and shouting when playing together, though still with rapid speech. The target set for Nazia was to consistently use speech with an audible volume and to pace herself so that individual words could be picked out more clearly. In the early weeks it was clear that whilst the support staff (who knew her well) could sometimes encourage her to speak with a louder voice, if she worked with me she remained very quiet. At this stage I used the amplification available in the software to model her own voice reaching a more audible level, and Nazia heard her peers encouraging her when we listened to the podcast, saying that they could hear what she said and that it was loud enough. For most of the sessions across the rest of the year the emphasis varied between slowing her speech down to focus on gaps between individual words, and supporting her in raising the volume. On a few occasions I did take some time out to show Nazia how we could boost the volume of her speech using the software, and as a competent ICT user she could not only understand this but was able to have a go at it herself. Towards the end of the Spring term there was one podcast where Nazia and everybody else was very pleased with her performance; I had left her recording unedited because she had done so well at maintaining a reasonable volume and keeping her pace slow enough that she could be easily understood. As Nazia commented in her Record of Achievement "I liked listening to my own voice", and so did we Nazia!
- Ruby can hold a sentence-based conversation with you, but tends to stammer if asked to repeat something which you didn't grasp, or if she is in a more formal situation such as many typical classroom activities. She also has an unusual pattern of intonation, not the modern style of raising the voice at the end of a statement (as if it were a question), but a habit of sudden emphasis on words or sections of sentences that seems quite random. With this in mind, the focus for Ruby was to tackle the intonation, aiming for simple sentences with standard intonation. The software did give us the chance to show Ruby models of her own voice with most stammers edited out, and she commented favourably on this. In terms of the odd bursts of excess volume though, it always seemed to remain noticeable, even when the word or phrase had been reduced in volume compared to the rest of her recording, so it was difficult to provide a model in her own voice to encourage her in what to aim for. Nevertheless, Ruby did respond to being verbally encouraged to try to control this more, and enjoyed hearing adults demonstrating what it would sound like if they spoke with erratic volume. By the end of the year Ruby was generally controlling these sudden bursts far more than in previous everyday speech, and to quote her from her end of year Record of Achievement for this work: "I have improved on talking quietly when I get excited."

- Liam was new to the school at the start of the academic year, and setting a suitable target for him was somewhat harder than for the other pupils. His physical difficulties meant that articulating the separate sounds of a word, and putting a sequence of words together was a significant effort for him. It was clear from those who already knew him well that his ability to understand verbal communication was very good, and that he was always keen to verbalise if he thought that the people around him could understand him. So I set a basic target of working on single words, of two syllables, but with an awareness that we may need to adapt this as the year went along. Like most of the others in the class, Liam seemed to really like the process of podcasting, working hard on the verbal aspect, joining in very positively with feedback for peers, and being very proud when he heard his contribution within an episode. As with James' progress, although it would still be very difficult for a person who doesn't know Liam to understand his speech, he did make progress and this was in large part also due to another development he made. This was that he accepted time delays in modelling words to speak, so instead of impatiently saying his part over the top of the adult's attempt to model it carefully, he began to wait until it was clear that the adult had completed the model, and then have his go. This improved to the point that by the end of the year he would sometimes tolerate waiting for two words to be spoken for him to then have a go at saying both, without a further adult prompt. Liam's end of year comment interestingly took a view on the whole class, rather than just his personal achievement, "We got clear, got better."

My regret is that time didn't allow us to follow up work each week by getting at least some of the pupils to have a go at editing their own sound file. This, in my mind, is definitely where the most valuable further development would lie, helping the pupil to see and hear the possible differences using sound editing software.

I have also written a Case Study for BECTa about this work, to complement this article and to focus more on the background to the project and how we set about it. This is currently being submitted and I'll publish a link to it on the blog as and when it goes live.