

## **'Buzz Words' – a multisensory approach to word learning at ICAN's Meath School**

ICAN's Meath School is a non-maintained day and residential primary special school for pupils aged 5 to 11 years, with severe and complex communication disabilities. Many of the pupils also have difficulties with fine and/or gross motor co-ordination, attention control and accessing the curriculum without a high level of support. Some pupils may have an additional learning need associated with mild autistic characteristics.

Pupils are grouped in classes according to comprehension level rather than age, in order to ensure that language delivery is appropriate for all, and are taught in small classes with a multidisciplinary team comprising of a teacher, at least one teaching assistant and SLT. Pupils are taught in an environment with a reduced language level and a high level of visual support. They receive intensive speech and language therapy input within a range of settings – individually, in small groups and within a whole class group. Weekly class planning sessions are carried out with all staff involved to ensure that curriculum subjects are differentiated appropriately and that there is continuity between teaching and therapy.

All of the pupils at Meath have significant speech and/ or language difficulties. Of these a high proportion have severe difficulties learning and retrieving vocabulary. The therapy team have been investigating ways of making word learning more practical and effective and have successfully developed the 'Buzz Word' programme – a structured, multisensory approach that makes word learning explicit to pupils with severe language and literacy difficulties.

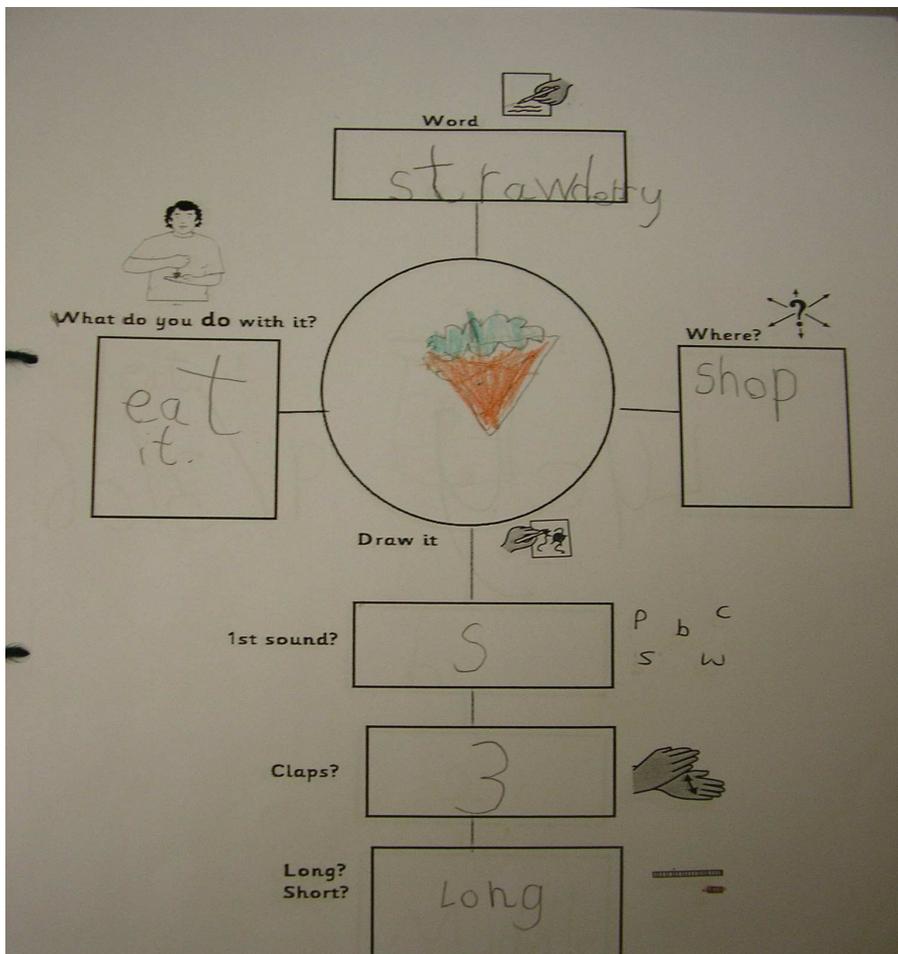
Many therapists and teachers already use a multisensory approach when teaching vocabulary. Recent research with pupils with SLI has highlighted the need for therapists to link vocabulary learning to the curriculum so that it provides support for class learning. In addition the need to liaise and plan carefully with teaching staff has been identified as a key feature of effective therapy intervention in word learning (Parsons, Law and Gascoigne 2005).

When working with pupils at Meath we found that we needed to make the process of word learning more explicit than would usually be necessary, to enable the pupils to become aware of, and active participants in, the process of word learning. The long term aim of the approach is to facilitate independent word learning. However, due to the severity of the pupils's language difficulties, this approach has needed to be broken down into smaller stages, as follows:

### **Stage 1**

At the initial stage the focus is on increasing the pupil's awareness of word learning as a discrete activity, so that a specific word learning lesson takes place at a regular time each week. In discussion with the class teacher a key word related to the curriculum is chosen as 'word of the week'. At this stage

the word would usually be a concrete noun. There is a discussion session where the object is passed around, tasted, touched, linked to other similar items etc. Following on from this there is a recording session where each pupil fills in a worksheet that identifies phonological and semantic information about the word. Recent research has shown that pupils with vocabulary deficits store less semantic and phonological information than their peers (Nash and Donaldson, 2005). The Buzz Word approach, therefore, makes this information explicit for the pupil in a format which they can easily refer back to. The worksheet is always presented in the same format to allow for predictability so that the pupil can identify what sort of information is likely to go in each area. The worksheets at this stage have spaces for the pupil to fill in key semantic and phonological information about the word as well as writing the word and drawing a simple picture of it – Clicker symbols can be used for pupils with fine motor difficulties.



## Stage 2

At the next stage the worksheet is extended to include a space for using the word in a sentence and links the word to the curriculum subject where it was first heard.

Write the word

Vehicle

long  
middle  
short

long

What is the first sound?

V

How many claps?

2

Draw a picture

It goes together with

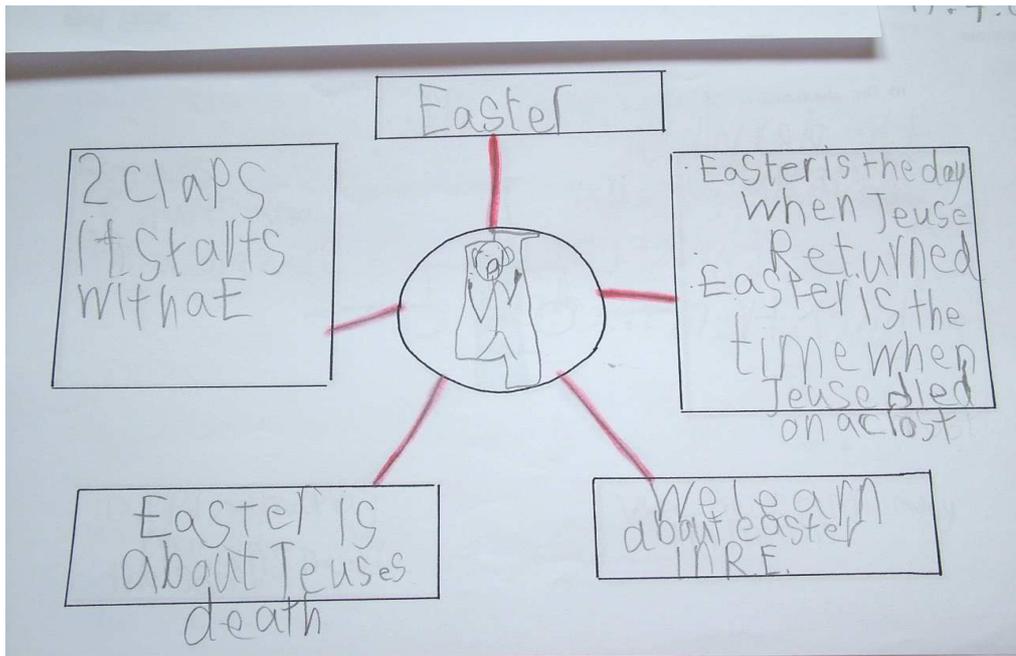
Lorry

Write a sentence

A Lorry is vehicle

### Stage 3

The final stage encourages the pupil to include a range of information that they know about the word e.g. identifying key features in bullet points. This stage provides a useful starting point for the pupil to begin independent word learning using the 'Buzz Word' framework. The pupil can use a dictionary to look up words and enter key information without the need for constant adult input.



To make word learning optimally effective, it is important to review new words at regular intervals until they are, hopefully, stored in long term memory. Approaches using memory theory (Jane Mitchell) suggest new words should be reviewed at specified intervals. Within the school setting this has not always been possible; however, we have found reviewing the words at regular intervals has been effective e.g. by asking the pupil to recall which word they have learned in their 'Buzz Word' session and to give key information. Also pupils have the opportunity to use the words in curriculum subjects allowing further reinforcement in a functional context. Each pupil has a 'Buzz Word' book with all of the words that have been covered in the word learning sessions; which can be used as a reference tool if necessary, and are independently accessed by some pupils.

It is hoped that this approach is one that can be continued to support independent word learning at secondary level, where there is huge increase in the amount of curriculum vocabulary the pupil has to learn. It would be possible to use this approach in conjunction with specified curriculum vocabulary lists so that the pupil could amass a vocabulary resource for each subject as necessary.

Within Meath School there has been a very positive response informally from pupils to 'Buzz Word' lessons. They have been able to identify what helps them learn words and, by Stage 3, have the tools they need to learn words independently. We are planning to formally evaluate its effectiveness with a range of pupils in the near future.

In summary 'Buzz Words' is a highly structured approach for supporting pupils with Specific Language Impairment to learn words independently so that, as time goes on, they can begin to be active participants in the process of word learning.

**Jean Wilson** – SLT Meath School  
Email: [jeanwilson@meath-ican.org.uk](mailto:jeanwilson@meath-ican.org.uk)

**Catherine Dobson** – SLT Meath School  
Email: [catherinedobson@meath-ican.org.uk](mailto:catherinedobson@meath-ican.org.uk)

#### References:

Parsons S., Law J., Gascoigne M. Teaching receptive vocabulary to children with specific language impairment: a curriculum based approach. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy* 2005; 21,1, 39 – 59

Nash M., Donaldson M. Word learning in children with vocabulary deficits. *Journal of Speech, Language and Hearing Research* 2005; 48, 439 -458