

FRESH AIR AND FLUENT SPEECH: ENHANCING EAL & ELL COMMUNICATION SKILLS THROUGH OUTDOOR LEARNING

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Introduction

This research project will focus on the Foundation Stage (FS) department in an International British School in Dubai, which has 168 children in FS1 and 239 FS2 children enrolled. The study will specifically examine a sample of 24 English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners, aiming to explore how English language skills can be developed through outdoor play. Spending time in nature during childhood can improve mental and physical health, support academic success and cultivate pro environmental attitudes and behaviours. (Patchen et. al., 2022). Taking the time and just doing it, getting educated and inspired, embracing an outdoor pedagogical mindset, engaging in real-life experiences and reflecting on these experiences can support teachers to establish outdoor learning (Van Dijk-Wesselius et. al., 2020).

Our objective is to assess the impact of nature-based, play-driven experiences on the language acquisition, developmental progress, learning outcomes and overall well-being of our youngest learners. This research will run in parallel with ongoing enhancements to our outdoor learning environment, with a vision to create a more natural, nurturing and stimulating space. The ultimate goal is to foster a language-rich setting that supports the diverse needs of our EAL and ELL (English Language Learner) students, helping to narrow the language gap through immersive, meaningful interactions with the natural world.

Methodology

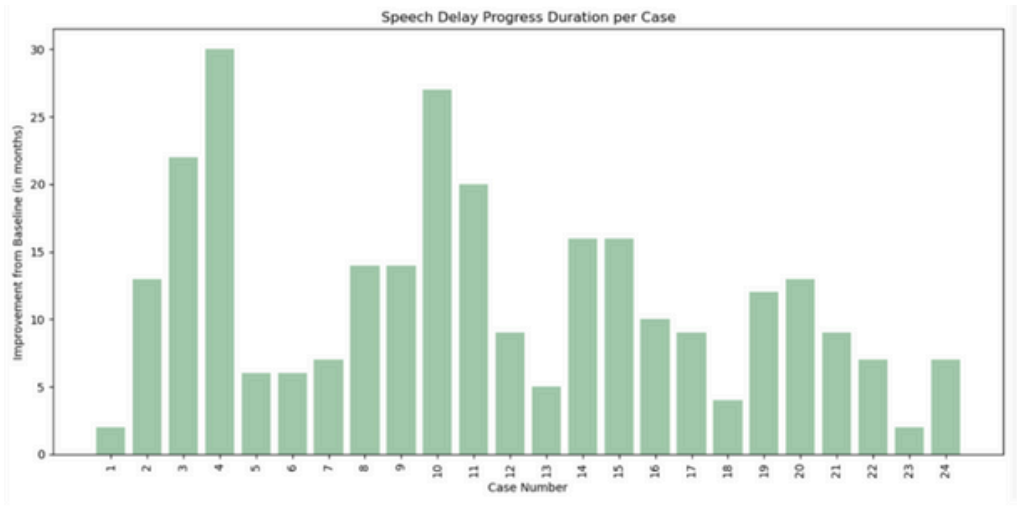
This action research project was conducted over an 8-week period across three early years classrooms, focusing on children aged 3–5 who speak English as an additional language (EAL). The aim was to explore how enhanced outdoor learning environments, combined with teacher training and the use of visual communication aids (widgets), could support vocabulary development in young EAL learners. The research followed a cyclical model of planning, action, observation and reflection. Initially, baseline data was gathered through structured observations, language sampling during ChIL (Child Initiated Learning) and a vocabulary check to assess each child's use of English. Teachers also completed pre-intervention reflections to identify current practises and areas for development, enhancing their outdoor plans where necessary to specifically support EAL children.

The intervention phase involved three key components:

1. **Enhanced Outdoor Environments** – Outdoor areas were enriched with language-promoting resources such as open-ended objects, themed play areas and interactive displays.
2. **Visual Widgets** – Children were provided with visual aids (e.g., picture cards, symbol boards) to support word retrieval and sentence construction during play.
3. **Teacher Training** – All practitioners (Teachers & Learning Assistants) participated in professional development sessions focused on strategies for supporting EAL learners, including modelling language, using open-ended questions and integrating vocabulary-building techniques into outdoor routines.

Throughout the study data was collected through ongoing observations, video recordings of ChIL sessions and teacher reflecting on their own planning. These qualitative methods were complemented by an end of study vocabulary check to measure changes in spontaneous English word use. Data was analysed thematically to identify patterns in language use, engagement and teacher practise. Quantitative data from the vocabulary checklists was used to track individual progress and overall trends (see **Table 1**).

Table 1
Language known at Baseline vs End of Year assessment using standardised testing, measured in months.



Conclusion

The Fresh Air, Fluent Speech project demonstrated that enhancing outdoor learning environments, equipping teachers with targeted EAL training and incorporating visual communication tools significantly improved the vocabulary development of children aged 3–5. These children, many of whom are EAL learners, showed marked progress in both expressive and receptive language skills.

Observational data revealed that children engaged more confidently in peer interactions during outdoor learning, frequently using newly acquired vocabulary in context. Natural play elements, such as mud kitchens, planting areas and water areas, encouraged rich, descriptive language and storytelling, far more than the playground structures. Children were also observed independently using visual widgets to support their communication, demonstrating increased autonomy and confidence in language use.

Teachers reported a notable boost in their confidence when supporting EAL learners, attributing this to the focused professional development and practical strategies introduced during the project. These strategies became embedded in daily practice, leading to more consistent and intentional language support across the setting. Post-intervention vocabulary assessments indicated a significant increase in spontaneous English word use, highlighting the effectiveness of the integrated approach.

With a forward-looking vision to create a greener, landscaped environment and to continue investing in staff development, the project aims to fully immerse children in nature. This approach fosters a language-rich setting that not only supports vocabulary acquisition but also helps close the language gap for EAL and ELL learners, laying a strong foundation for future academic and social success.

References

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