

Oral language project talks primary students into reading

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Gemma James, with Grade 2 students Jake Ho and Vy Pham, at Christ the King Primary School at Braybrook in Melbourne, says: 'There's been a huge difference in the kids'. Picture: David Geraghty
Source: The Australian

THE best way to start children reading is to get them talking first. A new approach being trialled in schools focuses first on improving students' speaking skills and has doubled their rate of progress in learning to read.

A group of Catholic schools in Melbourne taught students spoken language skills in the first three years of school as part of their reading program, focusing on improving vocabulary, using longer sentences, teaching letter-sound relationships and being able to tell a story in sequence.

The research project was conducted with about 600 students in 14 schools, with teachers in eight of the schools receiving special training in teaching oral language while six schools acted as controls.

Students' reading and comprehension was assessed at the end of each year and those specifically taught oral language skills had improved at twice the rate of students in the control schools.

For students whose parents speak English as a second language, the improvement was even more dramatic, about four times higher. In the control group of schools, students from non-English-speaking backgrounds fell further behind their English-speaking peers in reading.

Nationally, about one in five children starting school is falling behind in language and cognitive skills as measured by the Australian Early Development Index, rising to 25-30 per cent in disadvantaged communities.

The Catholic research found that differences in the spoken-language skills of children accounted for about 28 per cent of the variance in their reading scores. Among children from poorer backgrounds and those whose parents speak English as a second language, the difference was even greater at 40 per cent.

One of the schools that participated in the oral language stream was Christ the King Primary School at Braybrook in Melbourne's western suburbs, with 96 per cent of its students from non-English-speaking backgrounds and 80 per cent arriving at school speaking English as a second language.

By Year 3, the students' scores in national reading tests are almost at the national average.

The school's literacy leader, Gemma James, said many of the children were fluent in their own language, and teachers started by building students' English vocabulary and having them tell stories about their own experiences. "There's been a huge difference in the kids, how they talk to each other," she said. "They're more fluent readers and their levels of comprehension seem to gel quicker."

The manager of student learning programs at the Catholic Education Office Melbourne, Judy Connell, who oversaw the project, said the approach was prompted by a rise in the number of students referred to speech pathologists.

Ms Connell cited a US study conducted in 1995 that found a correlation between the number of words a child might hear at home and the development of their vocabulary. But Ms Connell said the quality of the interaction was important. While the problem was worse in poorer families, 15 per cent of children in the most advantaged families fell behind in language and cognitive skills.