# **Supporting the Use of Excellent Speech Language and Communication Skills in Settings in Greater Manchester**

# **An audit tool to identify strengths and areas for Development**

## **Introduction**

The Communication Supporting Classrooms Observation Tool (CSCOT) (Lyndsey et al, 2012) was developed as part of the Better Communication Research Programme resulting from the Bercow Review (2008). It has long been recognised that the learning environment and the people in it, play a crucial role in supporting children’s language development, a foundation skill for life. The Classroom Observation Tool provided a way of evaluating the environment by looking at the strengths and areas for development. The Classroom Observation Tool was however designed to be used in the formal learning environment for Reception, Yrs1 and 2.

The tool below borrows unashamedly from the excellent CSCOT, whilst incorporating the latest research and making the tool applicable for all Early Years settings.

The following 6 principles have been synthesised from more recent academic work by Professor Kathryn Hirsh-Pasek (2020) as ways of supporting optimal language and communication:

1. Children learn what they hear most
2. Children learn words for things and events that interest them
3. Interactive and responsive environments build language learning
4. Children learn best in meaningful contexts
5. Children need to hear diverse examples of words and language structures
6. Vocabulary and syntax (grammar) development are reciprocal processes

This tool is divided into 3 sections:

* **Interactions** i.e. the way that adults talk to children and support their language development
* **Opportunities** in the setting for language learning
* **Physical environment** – how this promotes language learning

# **Greater Manchester Early Years Language and Communication Audit Tool for use in Settings**

## **Instructions for use:**

* The primary focus of this audit tool is to explore the **quantity and quality** of the adult child interactions in a setting as it is these people who have the most influence on children’s speech and language development.
* Please decide how to use this tool as a team. It is important leaders/managers are involved as well as frontline practitioners. It is useful to check out your environments together. Peer observations or video is often useful when thinking about adult/child interactions, as well as observation and coaching from leaders.
* Locally there may be professionals such as Communication/ Language Development Workers who can support you in your use of this tool and the strategies.
* It is recommended that the observation takes place during a ‘regular’/ ‘typical’ session.
* The tool is designed so each section is free standing. The most important section, interactions being the first.
* Dedicate time for observation in the provision and discussion/planning at a later time in a quiet space.
* The observer may not see all strategies being used in the allotted time so a conversation with a member of staff is useful.
* It is helpful to use a real example to evidence the response
* This audit should not be used in a punitive or critical way. The information gathered will enable a practitioner or manager to understand theirs and their whole setting’s strengths and needs.
* This tool can be used in all rooms in your setting, from baby through to pre-school. In the tool ‘child’ refers to all ages from baby upwards.

1. **Interactions -** *“Engaging children in high quality language learning interactions (LLI) with adults in the classroom is important for oral language development”*

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| **Strategy** | **Does the adult…** | **Observed**  *(Tick each time seen)* | | | | | **Not seen** | **Action** |
| **TUNING IN TO THE CHILD/BABY** | Get down to the **same level** as the child? |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Watch** what the child is interested in and doing before talking and **respond** to this? |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Wait** to give the child chance to communicate with words or actions? |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Actively listen** to what the child has tried to tell them? |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Interpret** what the child has attempted to tell them or show them? |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Use the child’s **name** before speaking? |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **HELPING THE CHILD TO UNDERSTAND** | **Praise** good listening skills? |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Use natural **gesture** and facial **expression** along with the spoken word? |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Use **visual** helpers like showing objects or pictures along with the spoken word? |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Use a **slow, steady** pace of speech with **pauses** to give the child thinking time? |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Adapt** their language to the level of the child? E*.g. using sentences that are 1-3 words longer than the ones the child is using themselves* |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Emphasise** and **repeat** key words? |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Show** they have recognised when the child has not understood what the adult has said? |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Refrain** from using sarcasm or expressions a child might not know? |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **COMMUNICATIVE EXCHANGES (ADULT AND CHILD TAKING TURNS: ‘SERVE AND RETURN’)** | **Wait** for the child to respond or talk? |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Praise** attempts at communication? |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Respond to the child with words **and /or** actions? |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Use **intonation**/a sing-song voice? |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Acknowledge **non-verbal communication** as well as spoken words? |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Offer **choices** of activities or objects and say the words for the choices as well as showing the child *(E.g. Do you want apple or banana? Rather than* *“which do you want?” or “do you want banana?”)* |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **MODELLING LANGUAGE (CONTINGENT LANGUAGE)** | Talk about what the child is **interested in?** i.e. looking at, doing, thinking about |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Interpret** what the child intended to communicate: saying it ‘as they would if they could’? |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Repeat** and **expand** what the child has said by adding words and ideas? |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Models** a range of words linked to the activity by saying these in meaningful contexts:   * Nouns (labelling, naming words) * Verbs (action words) * Adjectives (describing words) |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Comment** more than question? *(Ratio of 1:4 is about right)* |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Questions used are **open** questions not closed? i.e. yes/no questions |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Match** the question difficulty to the child’s ability *(E.g. what, who questions are easier than why or how questions ?)* |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **SHARING STRATEGIES** | **Share** some of these strategies with families? |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

1. **Language Learning Opportunities -** *“Creating language learning opportunities (LLO) for children enhances their oral language and significantly impacts on language learning. Examples of this are adult-led story book engagement, structured interactions with both peers and adults in the classroom, and smaller but inclusive group work”*

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| **Area** | **Example** | **Observed/comments** | **Not seen** | **Action** |
| **PRACTITIONER AWARENESS** | Is the adult aware of **why** it is so important to talk to children in the early years? |  |  |  |
| Do practitioners **know what typically to expect,** when in terms of language and communication development? *E.g. Ages and Stages of language development* |  |  |  |
| **OPPORTUNITIES FOR COMMUNICATION WITH ADULTS** | Are **motivating** activities and experiences planned and provided for children to access and talk/communicate about? |  |  |  |
| Is the adult seen to be actively **creating** **opportunities** for communication with and between children? |  |  |  |
| Do practitioners look around the room to make sure every child is **involved and focused** on an activity of their choice? *(Some children wander and find it hard to settle).* |  |  |  |
| **OPPORTUNITIES FOR STRUCTURED CONVERSATION WITH ADULTS** | Are there opportunities for children to have **conversations with adults?** *(e.g., adults sitting at the free play tables to comment, ask questions, answer questions, a show and tell activity, give news, or discuss a forthcoming event)* |  |  |  |
| **SEEKING HELP** | Children are actively encouraged to **seek** **help** if they **don’t understand** something. |  |  |  |
| **WHERE** | **Setting -** how do practitioners **plan/create** language learning opportunities?  Do practitioners **plan** new words to target in activities? *(Vocabulary planning)* |  |  |  |
| **Home** – how do practitioners **share** ideas and strategies for language learning with **families?** |  |  |  |
| **Community** – how does the setting **engage with the wider community** and communicate information about this with families? *E.g. providing something that families can talk about when they are out and about* |  |  |  |
| **PLAY** | Do practitioners offer **guided** rather than **directed** or child solo play?  Do adults join children’s chosen play and model extensions to this? |  |  |  |
| **BOOKS**  How do practitioners use books to support language?  Vocabulary in books can be more diverse than in routine spoken language so books may expose children to new words. | Do storytelling and singing times **regularly** take place?  Are practitioners aware of **types of book**s appropriate for different developmental levels*? (E.g. sound books, ‘feely’ textured books through to longer story books)*  Do practitioners adapt their sharing of books for different children’s language levels and developmental levels?  **Engage** children in the process of telling the story?  Do practitioners ask any **question**s and or comment on about the story?  When do they do this? *(middle /end/beginning /all)*  Does the adult ask the child to **predict** what might happen next at opportune times in the story?  Does the adult **extend** a story by talking about things that might have led up to the story (*past events)* or things that might happen next *(future event)*? |  |  |  |
| **CHILD CHOICE** | Does the adult e**ncourage** the child to choose things that interest them? |  |  |  |

1. **Physical Environment -** *“Language learning environments (LLE) give children access to further language development and provides numerous opportunities for children to communicate with their classroom peers and adults”*

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| **Area** | **Example** | **Observed** | **Not seen** | **Action** |
| **LAYOUT** | Does the setting provide **quiet areas** for children at the different ages and stages to relax, have a conversation or share a book? |  |  |  |
| Is there a quiet **low distraction area** for focused language led activities if necessary? |  |  |  |
| Resources that are available for **free play** are easily reached by the children or easily within their line of vision? |  |  |  |
| Does the setting have different learning areas for different activities?  Is each learning area clearly defined? *Please comment on how this is achieved.* |  |  |  |
| Is there good light? |  |  |  |
| **DISTRACTIONS** | Are practitioners aware of **noise levels** in the room?  Is background noise kept to a minimum? |  |  |  |
| Do practitioners try to **control distractions?** *E.g. ensuring other adults are not carrying out jobs in view or earshot during key group or story time.* |  |  |  |
| Is the area generally visually calm and clutter free? |  |  |  |
| **BOOKS** | Is there a book area with books appropriate for the developmental stage of the children? *(Fiction and non-fiction)* |  |  |  |
| **PLAY** | Are there resources to support the different levels of play appropriate to the age of the children in the room? *E.g. exploratory, large doll, small world, and pretend play.*  A range of good quality resources are available for free play including:   * Small world * Manipulation toys * Imaginative *E.g. Fancy dress /kitchen* * Role play * Sensory/exploratory * Music & noise making * Construction * Creative * Real life /natural resources * Outdoor play equipment |  |  |  |
| **VISUAL HELPERS** | Is there a visual timetable?  If yes, does the visual timetable include age appropriate pictures/symbols? |  |  |  |
| The majority of learning resources and materials are clearly labelled with pictures. |  |  |  |
| Are routine stories and rhymes supported with props? |  |  |  |
| **DISPLAYS** | Some displays invite comment. |  |  |  |