



Evidence-based deployment of teaching assistants: a systematic review of interventions in the UK

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Evidence-based deployment of teaching assistants: why should schools care about it?

Teaching assistants (TAs)¹ represent a substantial part of the education workforce, playing an important role in supporting teaching and learning. This is particularly true in the UK, where TAs comprise a large proportion of school staff in all nations (Department for Education, 2024; Education Workforce Council, 2024; O'Connor et al., 2024).

Despite the increasing reliance on TAs, their impact on pupils' academic outcomes is mixed and appears to depend on how they are deployed (Alborz et al., 2009; Farrell et al., 2010). A review studying the impact of TAs in the UK found that a high level of support from TAs can have a negative impact on pupils' reading, maths and science outcomes (Blatchford et al., 2009). These findings highlight the importance of deploying TAs effectively, which is particularly important given the central role that TAs often play in supporting pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

One promising way to increase the impact of TAs is for them to deliver structured, evidence-based interventions. This is one of the ways that the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) recommend deploying TAs (EEF, 2025). They recommend that schools engage with the evidence to choose an appropriate intervention, but this may prove challenging for schools.

In this research, we reviewed the current evidence of interventions that can be delivered by TAs, that are available to UK schools. Our goal was to improve the impact that TAs have on pupils' academic outcomes by helping schools to choose effective, evidence-based interventions suitable for their pupils' learning needs and context.

How did we research teaching-assistant-led interventions?

We carried out a systematic review of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) that tested academic interventions conducted by TAs. First, we systematically searched research databases, websites and institutional reports to identify trials of small group and one-to-one interventions delivered by TAs. We included trials where the intervention was compared to 'business as usual' and was given to pupils aged 4-18, in mainstream education, in any OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation

and Development) member country. We identified 26 RCTs that met these criteria, which tested 21 different interventions. Next, we estimated the overall impact (effect) that each intervention had on pupils' academic outcomes. We also evaluated the quality of the evidence, examining any limitations in the research that might have affected the results. Finally, we reviewed which interventions are most likely to be effective for pupils with SEND.

1 There are many different terms for the role of teaching assistant. We use 'TA' throughout to mean an adult who is employed to support teachers and help pupils with learning activities, who is not employed by the school as a class teacher.

Which interventions had a reliable, positive impact on pupil outcomes?

Most interventions that we reviewed focus on improving literacy (including spoken language, reading and writing), while three aim to improve maths. We found that the evidence for TA-led academic interventions is very mixed. Of the 21 interventions we reviewed, the eight listed below had reliable evidence of a positive impact on pupil outcomes.

- **Abacadabra** (also known as ABRA) is a software-based reading intervention for pupils aged 5-7. Two independent UK trials by the EEF showed that pupils' **decoding skills improved by +2 months**.
- **Catch Up Numeracy** is a maths intervention for pupils aged 6-12 with maths difficulties. Two UK trials (one independently conducted by the EEF) showed that pupils' **maths attainment improved by +4 months**.
- **Developing Vocabulary** is a reading intervention for pupils aged 5-13 with reading difficulties (especially vocabulary). One small UK trial showed that pupils' **reading comprehension improved by +5 months** (although this may be an overestimate). A large upcoming UK trial by the University of Belfast/Fisher Family Trust may provide additional evidence.
- **Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI)** is a spoken language intervention for pupils aged 4-5 with spoken language needs. Two independent UK trials by the EEF showed that pupils' **spoken language improved by +3-4 months, and their reading improved by +2 months**.
- The **Reading and Language Intervention for Down syndrome** is a literacy intervention for pupils with Down syndrome and reading age under 8 years. One small UK trial of 50 mainstream schools showed that pupils' **reading (decoding and comprehension) improved by +5 months** (although this may be an overestimate).
- **Reciprocal Reading** is a reading intervention for pupils aged 7-14 with difficulty understanding texts. Two UK trials (one independently conducted by the EEF) showed pupils' **reading (decoding and comprehension) improved by +2 months**. An upcoming large-scale UK trial by the EEF may provide additional evidence.
- **Tutoring with the Lightning Squad** is a reading intervention for pupils aged 5-11 with reading difficulties. Two US trials showed that pupils' **decoding skills improved by +3 months**. An upcoming UK trial by the EEF may provide evidence of whether the intervention is effective in UK schools.
- The **Vocabulary Enrichment Intervention Programme (VEIP) and Narrative Intervention Programme (NIP)** are literacy interventions suitable for pupils aged 8-18. The interventions were created for pupils with speech, language and communication needs. One small UK trial by the intervention developers showed that pupils' **spoken language improved by +4 months** (although this may be an overestimate). A second small, independent UK trial of the combined programmes was conducted by the EEF in year 7 pupils with reading difficulties. Pupils' **reading comprehension improved by +3 months** (although this may be an overestimate). Note that the versions of the VEIP/NIP that were trialled included training for TAs, which is not currently available.

What could schools do differently as a result of this research?

If you are seeking to improve how your TAs are deployed, you could consider using one of the evidence-based interventions identified in this research. The tables below summarise eight interventions that have reliable evidence and are likely to improve pupils' learning when delivered by TAs. The summary tables may help you to compare and select the most appropriate intervention for your pupils' learning needs. Using an evidence-based intervention will enable your TAs to have impact on pupils' academic outcomes by providing the right kind of support. Using one of these interventions may also help your TAs to be better trained, more knowledgeable and more confident in the domain they are teaching. We recommend that you carefully consider several things when choosing an intervention. Addressing these key areas will help you to achieve the greatest benefits from an intervention:

1) What is the pupil need you want to meet, and is an intervention the best way to meet this need?

As you know, any intervention has a cost for pupils in terms of their time away from normal teaching and the support of the class teacher. It is important to consider the impact this may have on your pupils' progress (Blatchford et al., 2009). Interventions delivered by TAs need to be integrated with the mainstream curriculum and should complement and add value to high-quality teaching rather than act as a substitute (Blatchford et al., 2012). Interventions are not the only way for TAs to support pupils with SEND and it is important to consider other approaches.

2) Which intervention would best match your pupils' learning needs and is it likely to improve the skills and knowledge you want to focus on?

Different interventions are likely to improve different areas of knowledge and skills, and it is important to correctly match an intervention to pupils' learning needs. Carefully following the intervention guidelines for selecting pupils will also avoid the risk of the intervention not being sufficiently effective.

3) Carefully consider whether you can meet the requirements of an intervention and give it the same priority as any other lesson.

Our research found that it is important for pupils to attend the suggested number and frequency of sessions. To ensure this happens, it will be important that TAs' time is protected to implement all sessions. TAs also need adequate time to be trained, to plan and prepare, and to liaise with teachers to ensure that the intervention is integrated with the mainstream curriculum. These requirements will likely mean that your TAs' time needs to be more focused on the intervention than on other duties such as lesson cover. Interventions may also require adequate resources such as a quiet space or appropriate IT facilities.

4) Consider training for TAs. EEF guidance recommends that TAs are adequately trained to deliver interventions (EEF, 2025). All of the RCTs reviewed involved training for TAs which may lead to better outcomes for pupils (Dimova et al., 2020) (note that the training provided for the trials of ABRA and the VEIP/NIP are not currently available). TAs will need time to attend any training required for the intervention and receive ongoing support from teachers and intervention providers if available.

Summary of effective, evidence-based interventions

	ABRACADABRA (ABRA) software	Tutoring with the Lightning Squad	Developing Vocabulary	Reciprocal Reading	Vocabulary Enrichment and Narrative Intervention Programmes (VEIP/NIP)
Learning domain	Literacy (reading)	Literacy (reading)	Literacy (reading)	Literacy (reading)	Literacy (reading)
Which pupils?	Ages 5-7	Ages 5-11 with reading difficulties	Ages 5-13 with reading difficulties	Ages 7-14 with difficulty understanding texts	Ages 8-18 with reading difficulties (only trialled in year 7 pupils)
How long and how often?	20 weeks 4 x 15-minute sessions/week	6 weeks+ 30 minutes daily	10-12 weeks 15-20 minutes daily	12 weeks 20-30 minutes twice a week	23 weeks 40-60 minutes twice a week
How many pupils?	Small groups (4-5)	Small groups (2-6 in pairs)	Small groups (approx. 4)	Small groups (4-8)	Small groups (3-8)
Is TA training available?	Online training course	Yes (contact developers for details)	1-day training for 1 teacher and 2 TAs	2 days online or face to face	No training currently available
What further support is available?	Support from regional trainers	Regular and on-demand training	Contact developers for information	1 to 1 online support meeting and Facebook group	No further support is currently provided
What resources are provided?	- Online platform - Printable activities - Magnetic letter cards	- Printed resources - Matched texts - Online home access for pupils - Online reading assessment, pupil progress monitor	- Tools to diagnose children with less developed word-knowledge - Teaching templates and pupil support materials	- Guides - Matched texts - Plans, videos, text suggestions, book journals - Selection of stories - Reading assessment programme	- Lesson plans - DVD - Templates/ worksheets - Picture cards
Where can I find out more?	https://literacy.concordia.ca/resources/abra/teacher/en/	https://fft.org.uk/literacy/	https://fft.org.uk/literacy/	https://fft.org.uk/literacy/	Available from publishers (see Joffe, 2017)

	Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI)		Catch Up Numeracy		For pupils with SEND	
					Reading and Language Intervention for Down syndrome (RLI)	Vocabulary Enrichment and Narrative Intervention Programmes (VEIP/NIP)
Learning domain	Literacy (spoken language)	Maths			Literacy (reading)	Literacy (spoken language)
Which pupils?	Ages 4-5 with spoken language needs	Ages 6 to 12 with maths needs			Ages 5-11 with Down syndrome and reading age under 8 years	Ages 8-18 with speech, language and communication needs
How long and how often?	20 weeks Per week: three 30-min. group and two 15-min. individual sessions	5 months 15 minutes twice a week			40 weeks 40 minutes daily	12 weeks 50-60 minutes twice a week
How many pupils?	Small groups (3-6) and individual	Individual			Individual	Small groups (3-8)
Is TA training available?	Online training course (10-12 hours, flexible and self-paced).	x3 ½ day sessions			Online training course (12 hours over 6 weeks)	No training currently available
What further support is available?	• Support hub with extra resources and peer support • Support team • Free webinars	Lifetime support package including online resources and training videos			Tutor support during training	No further support is currently provided
What resources are provided?	• Language Screen assessment app • Handbook • Teaching materials including flashcards, story cards and 'Ted the puppet'	• Coordinator resources • Activities, templates and digital games • Progress tracking tools			• Handbook • Online assessment, record forms, example teaching materials, video demonstrations and instruction	• Lesson plans for all 24 sessions • DVD • Templates/ worksheets • Picture cards
Where can I find out more?	https://www.teachneli.org/	https://www.catchup.org/			https://www.down-syndrome.org/en-gb/resources/reading-language-intervention/	Available from publishers (see Joffe, 2017)

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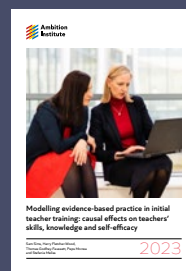
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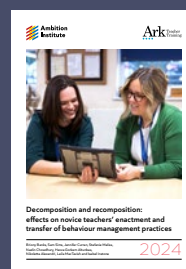


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Does adding modelling to professional development help to bridge the theory-practice gap? This research looked at whether video models helped initial teacher trainees to develop their retrieval practice skills.



This research explored whether breaking down (decomposing) and then recombining teaching practices into a different sequence of teaching (recomposing) helped initial teacher trainees apply what they learnt to new contexts.