



The centrality of spoken language to developing literacy and numeracy skills

December 2021

1. Overview

The centrality of spoken language to children’s attainment and life chances must be recognised as part of any efforts to recover children’s education following the pandemic, helping to build back better for them, and finally addressing the negative impact of poorer spoken language that has existed for far too long, especially in areas of social disadvantage. We urge the Government to seize this opportunity so all children and young people are able to achieve their potential, both in school and life.

- Having good spoken language¹ is central to children’s literacy and numeracy skills and their academic attainment, as well as their longer-term life outcomes.
- Poor language skills at age 5 significantly impact on children’s literacy and numeracy at age 11. While efforts around language development in the early years are crucial, the language gap widens as children move through school and needs addressing at every age and stage of education.
- Research for the Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) found that teachers believe the transition between primary and secondary school can negatively impact pupils’ vocabulary. Year 7 pupils are exposed to a huge amount of new language, up to 3 or 4 times as many words a day, partly as a result of the increase in “academic vocabulary”, with 43% of pupils identified as having a word gap.
- Children in areas of social disadvantage are at greater risk of having poorer language skills - and therefore poorer literacy and numeracy, and poorer long-term outcomes.
- Some children have persistent difficulties with spoken language which if unsupported can impact on their literacy and numeracy.
- The pandemic has exacerbated these issues, leaving children of all ages behind in their spoken language.

¹ This paper uses the term ‘spoken language’ throughout; the terms ‘oracy’, ‘speaking and understanding’ ‘speech, language and communication’ and ‘oral language’ are also commonly used in education.

- There is a need to improve the universal teaching of spoken language in all schools, alongside targeted and specialist provision where required, in order to address the variation in focus and delivery of core curriculum content on spoken language across schools. This has the potential to help transform attainment for all children, including those who are most disadvantaged and vulnerable. The Education Endowment Fund recognises the importance of spoken language: ‘A focus on oral language skills will have benefits for both reading and writing’²

2. Poorer language, poorer outcomes

Poor language skills at age 5 affects reading and numeracy at age 11.³ Research has shown that:

- one in four children who struggled with language at age five did not reach the expected standard in English at the end of primary school.⁴
- one in five children who struggled with language at age five did not reach the expected standard in maths at the end of primary school.⁵

In areas of social disadvantage children are at greater risk:

- By the age of three, more disadvantaged children are, on average, 17 months behind their more affluent peers in their early language development.⁶
- As many as 50% of children in areas of social deprivation can start school without the language they need for learning.⁷

Therefore, children in more deprived areas can already be on the back foot when it comes to learning to read and write.

The gap widens over time. Children who have difficulty with spoken language fall further behind as they progress through primary to secondary school.

² <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/guidance-for-teachers/literacy>

³ [early-language-development-and-childrens-primary-school-attainment.pdf \(savethechildren.org.uk\)](https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/global/reports/education-and-child-protection/read_on_get_on.pdf)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Save The Children (2014). Read On Get On: How reading can help children escape poverty. https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/global/reports/education-and-child-protection/read_on_get_on.pdf

⁷ Locke, A., Ginsborg, J. & Peers, I. (2002) Development and Disadvantage: implications for early years IJLCD Vol 37:1.

- Vocabulary skills at age 13 strongly predict both maths and English GCSE results.⁸

The absence of a focus on spoken language in education hampers children and young people's long-term opportunities and capabilities, with disadvantaged children and young people experiencing the most detrimental effects.

- Unemployed young people are almost twice as likely as those in employment or full-time students to feel that their schooling did not give them sufficient spoken language for success in later life.
- They are also around twice as likely to say that their education did not help them develop good oracy skills.⁹

3. Key challenges

- i. Variation in spoken language teaching and learning across school
- ii. The impact of the pandemic on the education of disadvantaged children and on access to specialist services

i. Variation in spoken language teaching and learning across school

There is a concerning variation in the time and attention afforded to spoken language across schools leaving the development of many children and young people's language skills and ability to chance. Research shows how the development of spoken language skills requires purposeful and intentional teaching. While some schools give spoken language a high priority, many schools are not meeting the statutory requirements for spoken language. Less than half (46%) of primary teachers and a quarter (23%) of secondary teachers say they are confident in their understanding of the 'spoken language' requirements outlined in the National Curriculum.¹⁰

ii. The impact of the pandemic on the education of disadvantaged children and on access to specialist services

⁸ Spencer, S., Clegg, J., Stackhouse, J., and Rush, R. (2017). Contribution of spoken language and socio-economic background to adolescents' educational achievement at age 16 years. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 52, pp. 184-96.

⁹ [Speak for Change Inquiry - report launched April 2021 | Oracy APPG \(inparliament.uk\)](https://www.inparliament.uk/committees/education-and-skill/2021-04-21/speak-for-change-inquiry-report-launched-april-2021)

¹⁰ [Speak for Change Inquiry - report launched April 2021 | Oracy APPG \(inparliament.uk\)](https://www.inparliament.uk/committees/education-and-skill/2021-04-21/speak-for-change-inquiry-report-launched-april-2021)

- The Education Endowment Foundation has found that 96% of schools were concerned about school starters' language and communication in September 2020.¹¹
- The Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group's Inquiry found that two thirds of primary teachers (69%) and nearly half of secondary teachers (44%) said school closures had a negative effect on the spoken language development of students eligible for pupil premium, compared with 1 in 5 teachers for their most advantaged pupils. Concern is consistent between Reception and KS1 teachers (71%) and KS2 teachers (63%).¹²
- Oxford University Press and The Centre for Education and Youth found that:
 - 92% of teachers think school closures (due to the pandemic) have contributed to a widening of the 'word gap'.
 - 94% found it challenging to support pupils' vocabulary development during the (first) national lockdown.¹³
- I CAN the Children's communication charity's YouGov survey found that 1.5 million children are at risk of not developing the spoken language skills they need.¹⁴

The pandemic has also impacted on the ability of pupils and schools to access support from speech and language therapists; the RCSLT's report found that 81% of children and young people received less speech and language therapy during the first lockdown.¹⁵

4. Reading and writing - the centrality of spoken language

The development of spoken language is essential to improving academic attainment, particularly literacy. The Education Endowment Foundation's updated Teaching and Learning toolkit highlights that oral language interventions (approaches that emphasise the importance of spoken language and verbal interaction in the classroom) are rated third in the list of effective approaches to improve learning outcomes in schools: "very high impact on pupil outcomes for a very low cost."

- The average impact of oral language interventions is approximately an additional six months' progress over the course of a year.

¹¹ [Impact of Covid19 on School Starters - Interim Briefing 1 - April 2021 - Final.pdf](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk) (educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk)

¹² [Speak for Change Inquiry - report launched April 2021 | Oracy APPG](https://inparliament.uk) (inparliament.uk)

¹³ [Oxford University Press - Word Gap - Oxford Language Report](https://oup.com) (oup.com)

¹⁴ I CAN (2021) Speaking Up for the Covid generation [Speaking Up for the Covid Generation](https://ican.org.uk) (ican.org.uk)

¹⁵ [Speech and language therapy services after COVID-19 | RCSLT](https://rslt.org.uk)

- Approaches that focus on speaking, listening and a combination of the two all show positive impacts on attainment. Most of the studies focus on reading outcomes. The small number of studies that do study maths and science show small positive effects.
- Oral language interventions are based on the idea that comprehension and reading skills benefit from explicit discussion of either content or processes of learning and might include the use of purposeful, curriculum-focused, dialogue and interaction, explicitly extending pupils' spoken vocabulary and the use of structured questioning to develop reading comprehension.

Reading

Language skills are essential for later reading ability. Good language comprehension is necessary for both reading and writing. It comes from linguistic knowledge and knowledge of the world. Phonics play a role in reading comprehension in beginner readers, but oral language gradually takes over as children become older.

- A study of children in primary school found that spoken language skills were the most important factor in recognising words and understanding reading.¹⁶
- A systematic review summarising a large body of further research on preschool children found that the foundation for reading comprehension is established in the preschool years through the development of language comprehension and phonic skills.¹⁷

Reading consists of two dimensions: word reading and comprehension (understanding the meaning of the text). It is important to develop both aspects, understanding what you have read is a critical component of reading; essential not only to academic learning but to life-long learning.

- Skilled word reading involves both the speedy working out of the pronunciation of unfamiliar printed words (decoding) and the speedy recognition of familiar printed words.
- The same speech processing system underpins both speech and word recognition. This means that children draw on the same skills when they develop spoken

¹⁶ Nation, K & Snowling, M J (2004). Beyond phonological skills: Broader language skills contribute to the development of reading. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 27, 342-356.

¹⁷ [Preschool predictors of later reading comprehension ability - The Campbell Collaboration](#)

language (the system of speech sounds), and when they develop written language (decoding and building words e.g. through a phonics approach).

Writing

Writing involves transcription (spelling and handwriting) and composition (articulating ideas and structuring them in speech and writing). It is very hard to write a story unless you can tell a story and likewise to write an analysis of an English text at GCSE unless you have understood the content and context of the task.

Developing vocabulary

Structured and purposeful talk in the classroom is one of the most effective means of building vocabulary and a limited vocabulary affects a child's academic performance. Research has found that teachers believe the transition between primary and secondary school is a particular challenge, with 43% of pupils identified as having a word gap. A talk-rich classroom enables students to hear, understand and use new vocabulary in context with their teachers and their peers.

5. What needs to change

It is vital that developing children's spoken language and communication forms a key pillar of any efforts to recover children's education following the pandemic, and longer -term strategies to improve literacy and close the attainment gap, including:

- Recognising that spoken language is at the heart of developing and improving literacy and numeracy;
- Building on efforts to address the language gap in the Early Years by a sustained focus on spoken language across all ages stages of education;
- Ensuring children with persistent spoken language difficulties receive the support they need, including identifying those difficulties in the first instance.
- Supporting teachers and schools to develop their students' spoken language and embed the statutory spoken language requirements through high quality guidance, training and resources;
- Better targeting of catch-up support towards speech and language development.

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