



Queen's Speech May 2022

The Schools White Paper: Addressing the widening language gap

Key Questions

Spoken language* underpins literacy development and vocabulary acquisition. It is central to learning across the curriculum, including in maths.

Given this fundamental relationship between spoken language and literacy and numeracy, our three organisations are calling on the Government to answer these key questions:

1. How will the Government ensure that the White Paper delivers its target of 90% of all children to achieve the expected standard in reading, writing and maths at the end of primary school when 1.5 million children and young people are behind with their speaking and understanding language because of the pandemic?
2. How will the Schools White Paper help ensure that every teacher is equipped to understand how to develop children's spoken language skills and ability, and how to identify those who struggle with their speech, language and communication?
3. How will the Government ensure that tutors under the National Tutoring Programme (NTP) have training in identifying children struggling with their spoken language and what support will those children receive?
4. How will the Secretary of State ensure that the Parent Pledge can be used to ensure children are monitored on their spoken language and are supported in attainment?
5. How will the Government ensure that schools use their Pupil Premium and Recovery Premium funding to address immediate speech, language and communication needs and use it to boost the quality of spoken language teaching and learning in schools in the longer-term?

** In this briefing, for ease we use 'spoken language' throughout. We take a broad and inclusive definition. We are talking about supporting children through oracy. We are also talking about supporting children and young people with speech, language and communication needs. This includes those who speak using Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) and sign languages, such as British Sign Language.*

Why this matters

The **Schools White Paper ‘Opportunity for all’**, published in March 2022, sets an ambitious target for 90% of all children to achieve the expected standard in reading, writing and maths at the end of primary school. Within it the Government has recognised the importance of early language skills in building strong foundations for literacy and numeracy in the White Paper.

Yet, despite the welcome focus on Early Language, the Schools White paper has failed to address the widening language gap between disadvantaged students and their peers as children move through school and is missing substantial proposals to sustain Early Years efforts to develop all children’s language and communication.

Evidence from the Education Endowment Foundation demonstrates that oral language interventions (teaching and learning with an emphasis on spoken language) enable an average of 6 months additional academic progress over the course of a year, listed as one of the highest impact and low cost interventions that can be made in the classroom¹.

There have been long-term challenges with developing children’s spoken language skills and with supporting children and young people with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).

The DfE’s own statistics show the scale of the challenge:

- In 2019, 27% of children finished their reception year without the early communication and reading skills that were deemed necessary by DfE to thrive (Expected Level by Early Learning Goal 2019). That’s 8 in every classroom.
- 22.5% of pupils with special needs in England have Speech, Language and Communication Needs as their primary need, the largest category of special need within the SEN Support system. This number has been steadily rising (DfE 2021). It is recognised in the Government’s [SEND Review Green Paper](#).

In addition:

- **one in ten** children have a long term speech, language and communication need (SLCN);
- as many as **50% of children in areas of social disadvantage** start school with language difficulties.
- **7% of all children** have Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) which affects how they understand and express language.

¹ The White Paper quotes the same source of evidence from the Education Endowment Foundation’s teaching and learning toolkit that “tuition enables students to make 4 months progress in primary and 2 months in secondary”. Extending the school day demonstrates students can make 3 months progress.

The Government's literacy and numeracy goals cannot be achieved without tackling the real and pressing need to embed putting children's spoken language at the heart of education reforms.

It is essential that this is reflected in the Schools White Paper.

It is also essential that the White Paper works hand in glove with the SEND Review to achieve an approach to spoken language that benefits all children and young people.

Children's spoken language: the impact of the pandemic

We know that children of **all ages** have missed out on months of opportunities to develop their spoken language since the start of the pandemic.

- Ofsted's recent report on education recovery in schools highlights gaps in pupils' speaking and listening skills.
- Research by the Oracy APPG shows that at the end of lockdown, [two thirds of primary teachers across all ages and nearly half of secondary teachers](#) 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.
- Evidence from the Oracy APPG's inquiry also showed that less than half of primary teachers and only a quarter of secondary teachers said they were confident in their understanding of the 'spoken language' requirements outlined in the National Curriculum.
- I CAN estimates also show that [1.5 million children are at risk of not developing the spoken language skills they need](#).
- Furthermore, children who depend on speech and language therapy have also been impacted severely. A survey by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists found that [81% of children and young people had less speech and language therapy during lockdown](#). 62% had no speech and language therapy at all.

The impact of poorer spoken language skills

While efforts around language development in the early years are crucial, the 'language gap' widens as children move through school. This needs addressing at every age and stage of education.

- Poor language skills at age 5 significantly impact on children’s literacy and numeracy at age 11².
- Vocabulary skills at age 13 strongly predict both maths and English GCSE results³.

Calls for longer-term reforms stemming from the Schools White Paper

The Government’s recognition of the centrality of spoken language to children’s attainment is welcome.

- The National Curriculum and the DfE’s 2021 Reading Framework (for Reception and Year 1) both recognise the importance of spoken language.
- The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) places Communication and Language Development on a statutory footing as one of the three Foundations of child development and all schools and Ofsted-registered early years providers must follow the EYFS.
- At a joint meeting of the Oracy and Speech and Language All Party-Parliamentary Groups in March 2022, Schools Minister, Robin Walker said:
 - *‘It is my personal mission to help make England a world leader in literacy, and spoken language development is a core part of those plans.’*
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The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, Voice 21 and I CAN welcome all of this. But we are calling for further clarity of how this commitment to spoken language will be realised through the new reforms set out in the White Paper and in the SEND Review.

Notably, this will mean:

1. Support for the development of spoken language to become a strategic priority for the Education Investment Areas over and above the current proposals for them.
2. The 2023 Reading Framework for Primary and Secondary Schools sufficiently emphasises the importance of spoken language for developing children’s literacy.
3. Ensuring monitoring of measures to address Speech Language and Communication Needs within Pupil Premium reporting, this is especially important given the correlation between

² <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/early-language-development-and-childrens-primary-school-attainment-english-and-maths-new-0/>

³ Spencer, S., Clegg, J., Stackhouse, J., and Rush, R. (2017). Contribution of spoken language and socioeconomic background to adolescents’ educational achievement at age 16 years. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 52, pp. 184-96.

disadvantage and SLCN. We also call for progress in spoken language to be included in the Parent Pledge so parents are aware if their child is falling behind and what the school is doing to support them.

4. As part of the National Tutoring Programme, ensure tutors have training in how to identify children struggling with their speech, language and communication and how to support them. With funding from the tutoring programme now set to go directly to schools, it is vital that schools are supported to identify where children might be struggling and to know how to support these children to catch up.
5. The Schools White paper includes plans for three new National Professional Qualifications in Literacy, Special Educational Needs and Early Years: these qualifications need to include an evidence-led focus on developing and supporting spoken language skills.
6. Targeted and Specialist interventions for spoken language beyond the Early Years should be included in the EEF Accelerator fund.
7. A focus on knowledge and skills around spoken language made available across the children's workforce, ideally as part of Initial Teacher Training and the Early Career Framework.
8. The White Paper's new test in 'literacy and numeracy' in Y9 should include a spoken language element.
9. The remit of English Hubs is extended beyond Reception and Year 1 to include the entire primary phase with spoken language as a key support area for professional development alongside phonics and reading.
10. The SEND Review must ensure that those children and young people with speech, language and communication needs are identified and receive the support they need, including speech and language therapy where required, to develop their communication skills.

Further information

For further details on the centrality of spoken language to literacy and numeracy please see [here](#).

For more information, please contact

- Gemma Carroll at Voice 21: inquiry@oracyappg.org.uk
- Peter Just at RCSLT: peter.just@rcslt.org
- Louisa Reeves at I CAN: lreeves@ican.org.uk