

Voicing Vocabulary



Establishing and evaluating
an oracy-centred approach
to vocabulary development
2021-2023



How can oracy education support vocabulary development?

In 2021, with the generous support of the Dulverton Trust, we launched a two-year research project to answer this question, establishing and evaluating an oracy-led approach to vocabulary development at the primary-secondary transition.

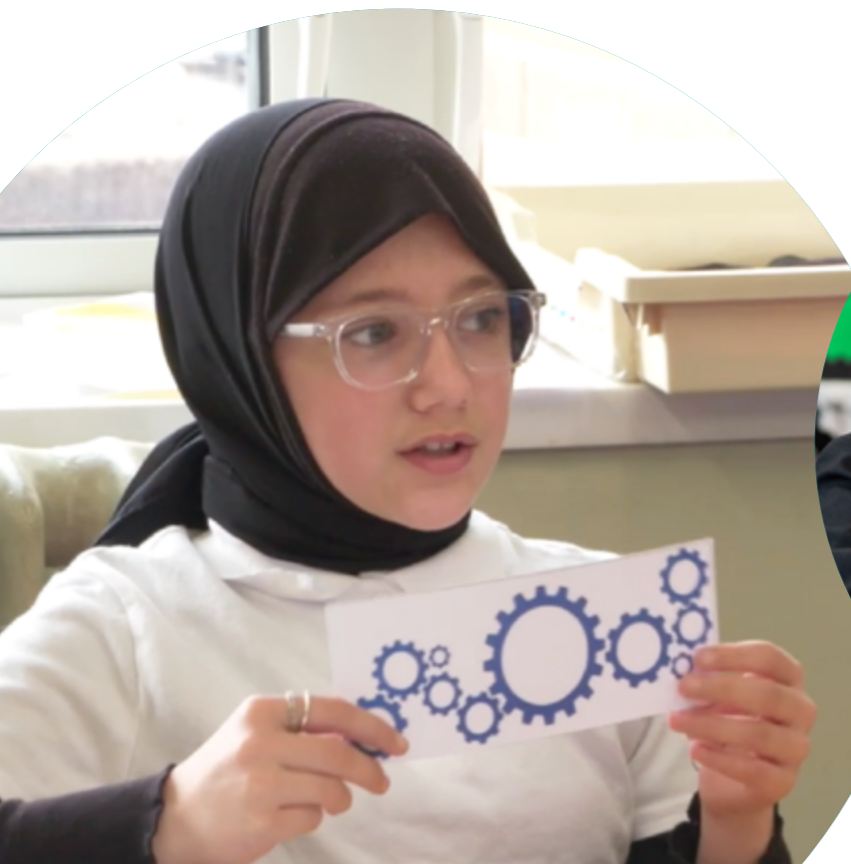
Research tells us that the size of a child's vocabulary is a predictor of academic attainment¹ and wellbeing in later life.² Consequently, a great deal of discussion in the education sector has centred on the importance of developing students' vocabularies and, in recent years, school leaders have focused on improving the teaching of vocabulary across their schools.

We know that oral language is the most effective vehicle for learning new words; it is through hearing new language and using it in speech

that children become able to read it, write it and deploy it with fluency. And yet, the opportunity to develop students' vocabularies as part of a wider focus on oracy, in which teachers deliberately cultivate language-rich classrooms, encouraging children to interact with a wide-ranging, diverse and complex spread of vocabulary, was largely absent from this discussion. We set about changing this.

The impact of the size of a child's vocabulary is particularly apparent at transition to secondary school; recent research suggests that there is a 'quantitative and qualitative step change in language' at secondary school, when compared to primary school.³ And so, we chose to focus on improving the vocabulary of Key Stage 2 and 3

Students became more confident to speak up in class



Year 6 and Year 7 students in Voicing Vocabulary schools made accelerated progress in their reading

students in Voicing Vocabulary schools through the development of an oracy-rich, cross-phase approach to vocabulary development.

The impact has been striking. Year 6 and Year 7 students in Voicing Vocabulary schools made accelerated progress in their reading. By the end of the project, students in Voicing Vocabulary schools were more likely to have an above average reading score than their peers nationally. And the impact was not only confined to test scores; participating students became more confident to speak up in class, both when discussing ideas in small groups and speaking to a larger audience.

Through the project we identified five active ingredients of an oracy-centred approach to vocabulary development. In this report, we outline each active ingredient, providing practical guidance to support teachers and school leaders across the UK to champion an oracy-rich approach to vocabulary development. This rich resource includes links to video clips showcasing oracy-led approaches to vocabulary development in action, as well as links to further reading and resources.

In publishing this report, we hope to make a valuable contribution to research surrounding the development of vocabulary, establishing oracy as an essential part of any discussion on how to improve vocabulary teaching in schools.

Amy Gaunt
Director of Learning,
Impact and Influence,
Voice 21



The Voicing Vocabulary Project

Talk is one of - if not *the* - most powerful tools at every teacher's disposal and in our quest to better understand how purposeful classroom talk can be harnessed to support vocabulary learning, we brought together twelve schools to form three regional clusters in the Black Country, Leicester and Pendle.

In each cluster, three primaries and a local secondary worked together, receiving bespoke professional development in oracy and vocabulary practice. Participants trialled new oracy-led approaches to vocabulary development, transforming how they plan for and teach new language. At the end of each project year, clusters collaborated in the design and delivery of innovative, talk-rich transition projects aimed at building both the academic vocabulary and the confidence of Year 6 students as they prepared to move to secondary school.

The success of the project is testament to the commitment of the teachers and leaders in our participating schools who have adopted new approaches with great enthusiasm, reflected honestly and shared generously with us over the last two years as we established an oracy-centred approach to vocabulary development. It is ultimately their voices - and through them, those of their students - that this report seeks to amplify.



Kathleen McBride,
Project Lead, Voice 21



What did we learn?

Students made accelerated progress in reading

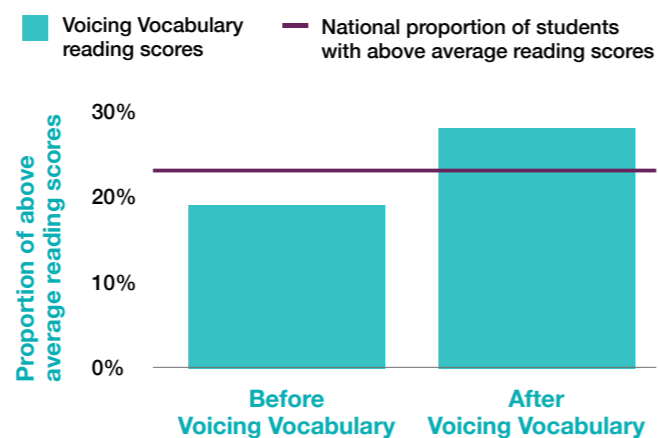
Year 6 and Year 7 students in participating schools completed standardised reading tests twice a year. At the start of the project, the proportion of students in Voicing Vocabulary schools with an above average* reading score (19%) was below the national average (23%). By the end of the project we saw an increase of nine percentage points (to 28%), meaning that now, students in Voicing Vocabulary schools are more likely to have an above average reading score than their peers nationally.

Students in Voicing Vocabulary schools are more likely to have an above average reading score

* Here, "above average" is defined using stanines (students in the 7th stanine or higher) rather than simply above the mean score.



New Group Reading Test results



Teachers became better oracy practitioners

Through rigorous and sustained professional development, teachers became more confident in their understanding of high-quality oracy practice, enabling them to create language-rich classrooms where students have opportunities to hear and use new vocabulary in context.



Teacher confidence

Start of project: 48%

End of project: 71%



Students developed the confidence to speak up in class

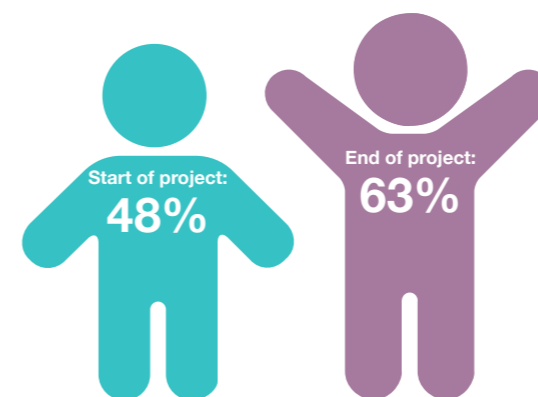
A deliberate and explicit approach to developing oracy built students' confidence to apply new vocabulary in spoken contexts

- ✓ Students in participating schools became more confident to speak in front of an audience
- ✓ Students felt more proficient discussing ideas in small groups
- ✓ Teachers reported that adopting an oracy-led approach to vocabulary development supported understanding and attainment across the curriculum
- ✓ Teachers noticed that students with speech, language and communication needs and those with English as an additional language felt better supported to participate in classroom talk

Now when you walk around school, you can hear children using vocabulary so much more confidently.

SARAH GROUND, YEAR 6 TEACHER

Percentage of students who enjoy speaking in front of an audience



An oracy-centred approach to vocabulary development has five active ingredients

Using insights from the project, we have identified five actions that schools can take to harness oracy as an effective tool for vocabulary development.

- 1 Establish a shared understanding of oracy
- 2 Prioritise vocabulary in planning
- 3 Contextualise new vocabulary through talk
- 4 Monitor ownership of new vocabulary
- 5 Collaborate across phases



Review

Listen to one of our project participants explaining the impact of the project on students in his school

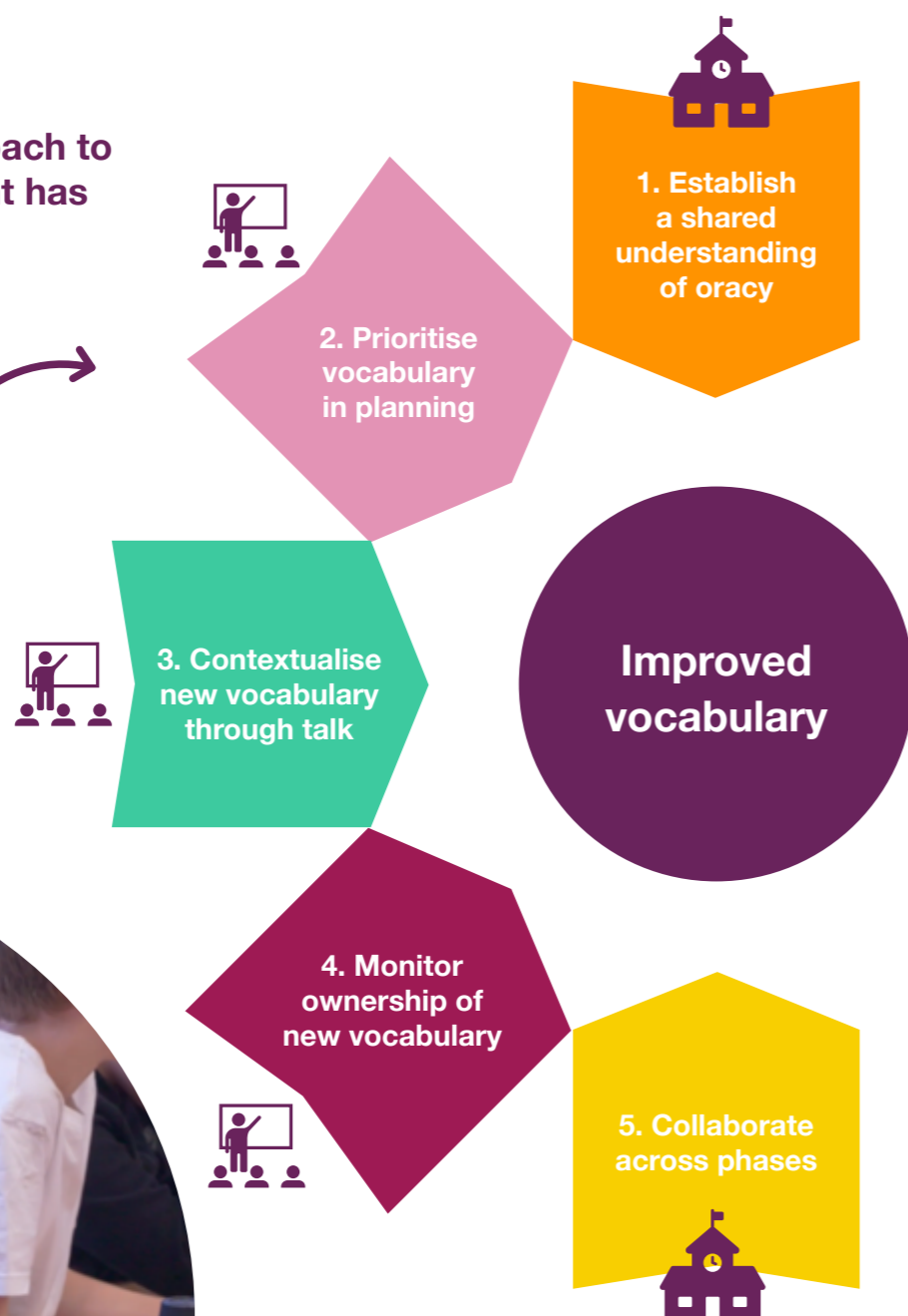
An oracy-centred approach to vocabulary development



Active Ingredients

An oracy-centred approach to vocabulary development has five active ingredients.

Click on the relevant active ingredient to navigate to that section of the report.



How to use this report

Learn

Learn more about the research and teacher insights that we've drawn upon to identify each of the active ingredients of an oracy-centred approach to vocabulary development.

Review

Watch or listen to teacher insights or particular strategies in action.

Reflect

Use our reflective prompts to consider your own practice.

Find out more

Follow signposts to key resources and relevant reading and research to further your understanding of high-quality oracy education.

1. Establish a shared understanding of oracy

To use talk for vocabulary learning across a school, teachers first need a shared understanding of high-quality oracy practice.

Whilst there is much emphasis on the role of talk for language development in the early years, less attention is paid to the role of spoken language – including the potential of high quality back-and-forth interactions – in building vocabulary as students move through and beyond primary school. In oracy-rich classrooms talk is at the forefront of teaching and learning, providing students of all ages with regular opportunities to hear and use new vocabulary in context.

Teaching oracy builds students' confidence to speak in lessons; teachers in Voicing Vocabulary schools noticed how implementing a consistent approach to oracy and vocabulary development led to better participation in group and whole class discussion. This provided their students with more opportunities to experiment with and retain new vocabulary.

Teaching oracy builds students' confidence to speak in lessons

To support participants with their oracy practice, we introduced the Oracy Teacher Benchmarks⁴ and the Oracy Framework⁵ as well as a range of scaffolds for talk to support students to participate in and benefit from high-quality classroom talk.



All the time I'm thinking, this isn't just talk for talk's sake, how is this going to help the children to construct their understanding?

LOUISE JENKINS, YEAR 6 TEACHER

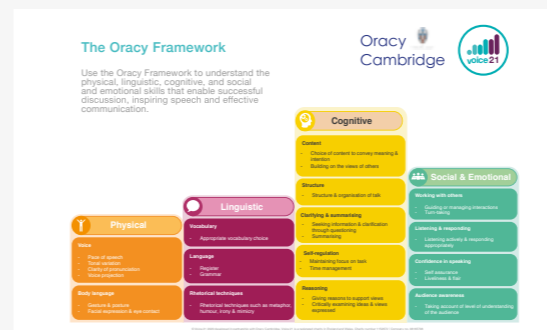
There's definitely a shared approach. We got an opportunity to look at the children in the secondary school using Voicing Vocabulary strategies and it was just so lovely to see children who had moved from our primary school being so confident in secondary school as well.

SARAH GROUND, YEAR 6 TEACHER

Find out more

The Oracy Teacher Benchmarks

The Oracy Teacher Benchmarks illustrate the hallmarks of excellent oracy provision. [The Oracy Benchmarks report](#) includes case studies and a self evaluation tool providing a starting point for anyone keen to build expertise in teaching and planning for oracy.

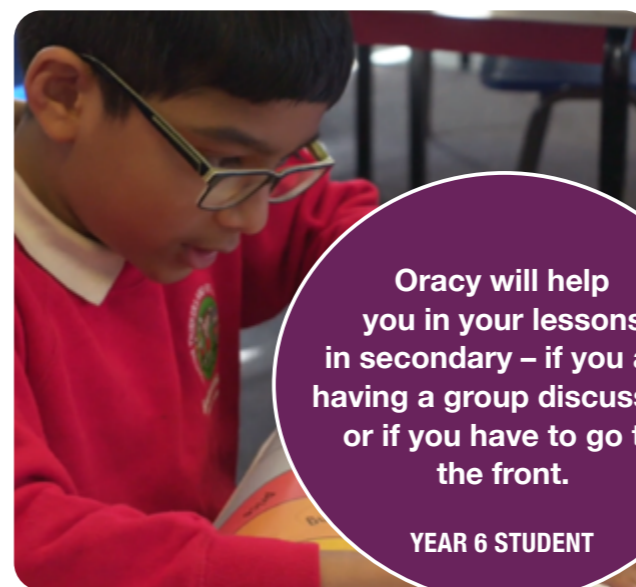


The Oracy Framework

[The Oracy Framework](#) breaks the concept of oracy into a range of teachable skills organised under four strands: physical, linguistic, cognitive and social-emotional. This supports both teachers' and students' understanding of the skills involved in different types of classroom talk.

Scaffolding talk

Voice 21's Talk Tactics encourage students to probe, challenge and build upon each other's ideas, supporting students to engage in exploratory talk for learning. Sentence stems enable students to focus on *what* they want to say rather than *how* to say it.



Oracy will help you in your lessons in secondary – if you are having a group discussion or if you have to go to the front.

YEAR 6 STUDENT

Review

Listen to teachers discussing how oracy education supports vocabulary development.

Reflect

- ? How do you approach teaching oracy skills in your classroom?
- ? What role does talk play in your vocabulary teaching?

2. Prioritise vocabulary in planning

Discussion and decision-making around which vocabulary to teach is vital both within schools and across phases.

Voicing Vocabulary participants developed a stronger understanding of the vocabulary students need most exposure to as they move from primary to secondary school. Teachers became more aware of which words were most useful to teach and why, leading to changes in their practice.

Teachers also changed when they think about vocabulary – discussing which vocabulary to teach, and how, at the beginning of their planning process, rather than the end. Talking and thinking strategically about vocabulary made the selection and teaching of language more purposeful; teachers taught fewer words in greater depth.

We'll plan a unit with about five key words we want students to learn rather than 20!

**BETHANY COLLINS,
YEAR 5 TEACHER**

Teachers became more aware of which words were most useful to teach and why

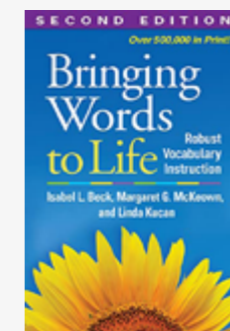


When it comes to planning, we now have a vocabulary first approach.

**HANNAH CLARK,
YEAR 6 TEACHER**

Find out more

In *Bringing Words to Life*, Isabel Beck and colleagues explain that Tier One words are those most connected to the language of everyday speech and typically require less explicit instruction in school.



Tier Two and Tier Three vocabulary is language that we are most likely to encounter in written text or more formal speech – language that we might associate with academic discourse and specialised knowledge.⁶ This language requires deliberate and explicit instruction.

Review

Listen to one of our project participants explain how they plan vocabulary teaching.

Reflect

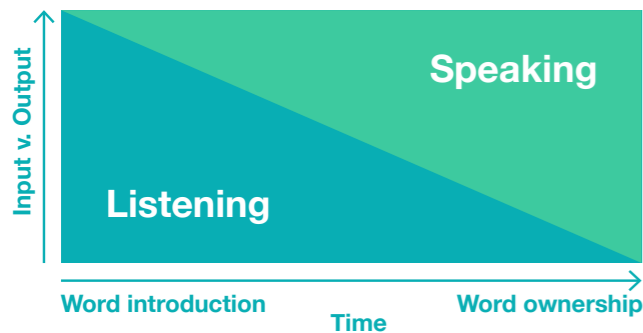
- ? How do you select which vocabulary to teach?
- ? How many words do you focus on per lesson or topic?
- ? When do you think about vocabulary in planning?

3. Contextualise new vocabulary through talk

Through talk, students can listen to and practise using new vocabulary as they move from word introduction to word ownership.

When students are able to use newly learned vocabulary accurately in a given context we can feel confident that they have 'ownership' of it. However, learning new vocabulary is a process that takes time as students are introduced to words which are gradually embedded in their productive vocabulary.⁷

The following framework supports decision making about the frequency and purpose of talk during different stages of vocabulary learning.



This process creates a depth of word knowledge, encouraging students to be playful and creative with new language.

We've seen how oracy is a great vehicle for teaching vocabulary. Having children say a word, use it in a sentence and put it into a context really helps to deepen their understanding of it.

HANNAH CLARK, YEAR 6 TEACHER

Through oracy, children construct their own understanding of a word. In the past we would explain definitions of words to children and show them a picture. They would remember them for that lesson but they didn't go into their long term memories.

LOUISE JENKINS, YEAR 6 TEACHER

During the input phase, students are introduced to new vocabulary and are given multiple opportunities to hear and begin experimenting with new language. During the output phase, students are encouraged to use recently learned language independently in speech as they build towards word ownership.

This process creates a depth of word knowledge as well as creativity with new vocabulary. Project participants were encouraged to consider how they could effectively scaffold students' use of vocabulary through a range of oracy-focused activities in both the input and output phases.

Find out more:

Voicing Vocabulary participants trialled a range of activities that support the input phase of vocabulary development

Examples and non-examples⁸

Teachers (or students) read out sentences using newly learned vocabulary. Students identify if the word has been used correctly. [You can see this in action in this video.](#)

Word association

Students create links between words by sharing what they think of when they hear new vocabulary, connecting language to previous learning and experiences. [Watch an example of this here.](#)

Talking Points⁹ and Concept Cartoons¹⁰

Embedding new vocabulary in lively discussion prompts situates words in a specific context allowing students to use, and hear others using, new language.



Consensus circles

In this activity, students generate lots of ideas linking to a question or task, placing them on the outside of a circle. Gradually – through talk – students come to an agreement on what should be included in their answer. Ideas are moved into the centre of the circle once the group has reached a consensus on what to include and what to leave out.

Intensity lines

Students discuss how to arrange vocabulary along a line in terms of intensity helping them to understand the nuance between different words with similar meanings. For example, in geography, students might position words such as 'spitting' 'torrential' etc. along an intensity line to describe different states of rain.

Fed-in-Facts

Teachers give out statements linked to a question which students read aloud and discuss as a group. Embedding key vocabulary into these statements allows students to see and hear language in context as they build understanding about a particular topic.

Review

Watch this clip. Year 5/6 children are learning about mechanisms in DT. In this lesson, the teacher is using a fed-in-facts activity. She provides students with images, then adds in key words for students to match to the images supplied.

Reflect

- ? How does talk support the students in this lesson to make connections between existing ideas and experience and new vocabulary?
- ? What is the balance between spoken and written methods for introducing and consolidating understanding of new vocabulary in your own practice?

4. Monitor ownership of new vocabulary

Talk is an effective vehicle for assessing students' mastery of new language.

Once students' familiarity with new language is established (through input activities) teachers can create meaningful oracy-centred opportunities for vocabulary output.

Careful planning of oracy-focused output activities is essential when developing vocabulary through talk. Output activities allow students to demonstrate their ownership of recently learned vocabulary and enable teachers to judge how effectively new vocabulary has been learned.

During the project, teachers built activities such as vocabulary bullseyes and fishbowl discussions into their schemes of learning enabling them to assess students' vocabulary knowledge. Crucially, these activities were used only after students had been given plenty of opportunities to hear and practise using new language.

Voicing Vocabulary participants reported that they now have more awareness of gaps in their students' vocabulary knowledge.

Towards the end of a scheme of learning or topic we'll use something where they can pull all of their ideas together and use oracy to showcase the vocabulary they've learned throughout a unit.

BETHANY COLLINS,
YEAR 5 TEACHER

Output activities allow students to demonstrate their ownership of recently learned vocabulary



Find out more

Vocabulary Bullseye

Participants used tiered vocabulary to create a bullseye of target language. In one lesson, students were asked to explain what happened during the Great Depression using vocabulary they had been taught recently. They were awarded more points for using complex vocabulary correctly.

Fishbowl Discussion

In a fishbowl discussion, a group of students forms an inner circle. The inner circle discusses a question or problem. Another group of children stand on the outside of the circle listening out for key information. The students listening in can be given different prompts, for example to listen out for use of key vocabulary.

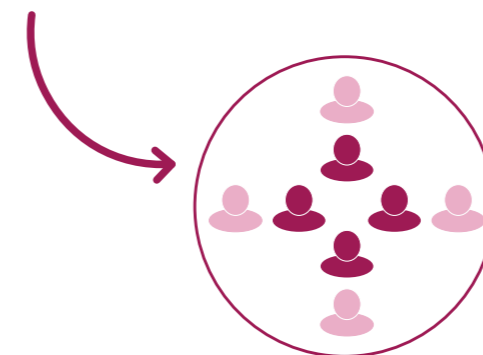


Review

In this video, students are using a vocabulary bullseye to support their explanations of the Great Depression and its impact.

Reflect

- ? To what extent do the children in the video demonstrate mastery of target vocabulary?
- ? What might the teacher do next?
- ? What spoken opportunities do you provide for students to use newly learned vocabulary?



5. Collaborate across phases

In Voicing Vocabulary schools there was improved continuity of practice and increased understanding of language expectations across phases.

Developing sustained partnerships between teachers can improve students' experience of the primary to secondary transition.¹¹ In Voicing Vocabulary schools, opportunities for Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 teachers to work with their cross-phase colleagues enhanced learning in both primary and secondary settings.

Typically, preparation for transition focuses on the environmental and social aspects of school life. Whilst this is extremely important, studies suggest that many students also experience disruption in academic outcomes during this time.¹²

At secondary school, there is a dramatic increase in the amount of new language that students encounter across the curriculum, increasing academic challenge.¹³ With this in mind, teachers worked collaboratively to develop cross-phase transition projects that focused on teaching subject-specific vocabulary through talk.

We listened to our Year 7s talking about transition and some of the challenges they've had with vocabulary and that means there is work to do to make that easier for them – that's what everyone wants.

ALEX CHORLEY, SECONDARY ENGLISH TEACHER

Sustained partnerships between teachers can improve students' experience of the primary to secondary transition



Leicester Cluster:

Polysemous language and emotional literacy

Project summary: An introduction to KS3 science and arts at with sessions in chemistry and drama

Key vocabulary: *react, product, irreversible, properties, extreme, emotions*

Schools in the Leicester cluster worked together to plan and deliver sessions in chemistry and drama, subjects which are typically new to students as they enter Year 7. In these sessions, teachers introduced students to some of the subject-specific vocabulary they will encounter in their first term in secondary school. They also wanted to highlight instances where the same word, such as 'reaction' can have multiple meanings across the curriculum.

The project began with teachers in the primary schools delivering an introductory session inducting students into the different sciences studied at Key Stage 3. They began exploring vocabulary they would encounter in the follow up session delivered in the secondary school.

In the secondary session, students observed how different chemicals interact and conducted a range of experiments documenting where chemical reactions took place. By the end of the transition project, students had been introduced to – and had applied – a range of new vocabulary that will be returned to throughout Year 7.

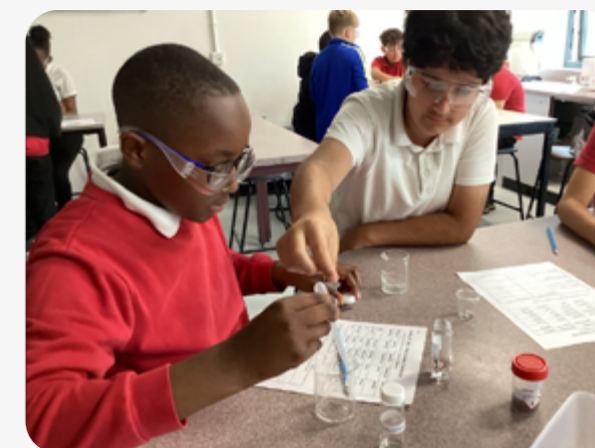
During the drama workshop, students were asked to consider their reactions to different scenarios they might encounter in secondary school. Teachers drew links between the meaning 'reaction' in science and drama, building deeper understanding of this word and highlighting to students that words have different meanings in different contexts.

Historically, we didn't have a lot to do with the secondary school. Through this project we've planned transition activities together. Long term we want this to carry on so that it's still something we're doing as a cluster of schools.

SARAH GROUND, YEAR 6 TEACHER



Teachers highlighted instances where the same word can have multiple meanings across the curriculum.



The Black Country cluster:

Mastering mathematical vocabulary

Project summary: An introduction to key mathematical vocabulary to support students as they identify and discuss patterns, generalisations and algebraic structures

Key vocabulary: *systematic, sequence, ascending, descending, square number*

In the Black Country, teachers identified maths as an area of particular concern for students, with many Year 6 students reporting that they felt anxious about the subject being much harder in secondary school than in primary.

To build students' confidence, a maths teacher from the cluster's secondary school visited participating primaries to deliver an oracy-based lesson giving students the chance to learn and apply key vocabulary. The target language was pre-taught by primary teachers in the lead up to the session.

I just don't want my Year 6s to go up to high school and be at a disadvantage compared to their more advantaged peers and vocabulary has a huge role to play in them having the confidence to express their ideas and opinions.

**KERRY HUTCHINS,
YEAR 6 TEACHER**

Teachers agreed upon a rich stimulus for mathematical talk and planned carefully how talk would be supported throughout the lesson and where new vocabulary could be introduced and applied. At the end of the lesson, students had the opportunity to ask questions about maths lessons in secondary school, giving them additional insights into what they can expect as they progress to Year 7.



Pendle cluster:

Building language for scientific enquiry

Project summary: An introduction to ideas and concepts relating to KS3 biology. Students learned about the relationships between different species and the importance of a balanced ecosystem

Key vocabulary: *biology, biodiversity, organisms, predators, extinct, aphids*

Schools in the Pendle cluster chose to focus on vocabulary to support learning in biology, recognising this as a subject where students encounter a significant increase in the amount of vocabulary needed to understand and discuss concepts with precision.

Teachers designed a transition project beginning with a session delivered in the primary settings by visiting secondary biology teachers. Year 6 class teachers continued and completed the project, sharing results and findings with their secondary colleagues at the end of the summer term.

There are a lot of words we use in transition. I don't think we'd quite realised it – this project has really brought that to light.

**VICKI DUPEROUZEL, SECONDARY
BIOLOGY TEACHER**

Review

Students were introduced to the concept of biodiversity, linking it to the discipline of biology. [You can see this part of the session here.](#)

Students learned how changes to habitat affect wildlife and considered the role people have to play in protecting their local environments. Teachers used a fed-in-facts activity to introduce students to selected vocabulary and to create opportunities for them to hear and begin using new language. [Watch this part of the session here.](#)



In the final part of the session, [which you can watch here](#), students were set the challenge of designing, building, collecting data from and sharing their observations of their own bug hotels. Secondary teachers are planning to extend discussions on this topic during their settling sessions in the first few days of Year 7, creating further connections between the language of primary and secondary school and building upon Key Stage 2 experiences.

Reflect

- ? What transition activities or projects are you/ is your school currently involved in?
- ? Which subject areas do transition projects tend to link to? Where is there scope to be more explicit in the vocabulary taught through these projects?
- ? What opportunities are there for cross-phase collaboration in your context?

Final word

Everybody is saying how this approach is really helping the children with their learning.

HANNAH CLARK, YEAR 6 TEACHER

Oracy will help you in lessons like if you are contributing in a class discussion.

YEAR 6 STUDENT

The thing I'm most proud of is the relationship between our staff and New College staff. Before the project I could not have named a single member of staff there. This is really making a difference.

SARAH GROUND, YEAR 6 TEACHER AND ORACY LEAD

Using the sorts of activities we've been using on this project, the children are able to carry their knowledge of word meanings for longer and use it in their future life beyond just that lesson.

LOUISE JENKINS, YEAR 6 TEACHER

Through Voicing Vocabulary, we've really built an oracy culture within the school.

CHARLOTTE VINCENT, ORACY LEAD

We are all in agreement that we want our students to leave us being confident, articulate and to feel that they have a voice and we think vocabulary is instrumental in this.

LIZ BROWN, SECONDARY ENGLISH TEACHER

We want to make sure that, even though the project has ended, we're still collaborating as a cluster of schools.

SARAH GROUND, YEAR 6 TEACHER AND ORACY LEAD

I'm looking for opportunities to get oracy into my vocabulary teaching now. If a student can say it, if they can use it in context then I'm hoping by the time that they do sit down and write their exams and assessments that they can get that correct.

COURTNEY RUSHTON, SECONDARY BIOLOGY TEACHER

I've got a much clearer idea of how I can embed new vocabulary into children's learning across the curriculum.

KARL CROSS, YEAR 6 TEACHER

I think if you have good oracy skills then you can communicate with people better and moving to secondary will be less nerve wracking.

YEAR 6 STUDENT

Having a really vocabulary-based curriculum has helped us with writing outcomes across the board in every subject area.

CHARLOTTE VINCENT, PROJECT PARTICIPANT

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following schools for their support and participation in the Voicing Vocabulary project.

The Black Country

George Salter Academy
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Rounds Green Primary School
Ryders Green Primary School

Leicester

New College
Braunstone Frith
Parks Primary School
Stokes Wood Primary School

Pendle

Pendle Vale College
Barrowford Primary School
Bradley Primary School
Walverden Primary School

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