

How to improve oracy and strengthen universal language provision in early years and primary schools

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About the research

Spoken language skills or oracy is the ability to speak eloquently, to articulate ideas and thoughts, to influence through talking, to collaborate with peers, and to express views confidently and appropriately. Oracy underpins children's educational success, impact on mental health and wellbeing and enhance positive life outcomes. Yet, many children struggle to develop competence in speaking and listening.

At school entry in the UK, an estimated 7.58% of children have clinically significant language disorders. In economically deprived areas, 40% of children are reported to have delayed language. Furthermore, [two thirds of primary school teachers](#) believe that the children that they teach are behind with their speaking and understanding due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Alongside these challenges, schools are increasingly driven by attainment targets, and this creates a tension with how much teachers can prioritise oracy – which is often overlooked – over specific curriculum activities.

A multi-tiered intervention model, graduating the level of support in line with need, can support children's oracy development. The first tier, or universal provision, is characterized by high-quality, evidence-informed oracy teaching for all. This emphasizes the need to support children's oracy needs within the classroom setting, before providing more targeted (Tier 2) and specialist support (Tier 3). Our study evaluated the effectiveness of a universal language intervention called Supporting Spoken Language in the Classroom (SSLiC) Programme.



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Policy recommendations

Interventions informed by evidence of effective professional development and learning as well as language and communication development and pedagogy are needed.

The Department for Education should raise the profile of the importance of spoken language in education by:

- Putting oracy on an equal footing with literacy and numeracy.
- Recognising the importance of spoken language beyond early years.

Educational professionals should be empowered and equipped to support children's oracy skills by:

- Developing oracy leaders in educational settings to enable a learning culture and the conditions for oracy to thrive.
- Developing evidence-based tools and resources to support high-quality teaching.

The Department for Education should invest in continuing professional development by:

- Employing the elements of effective professional development and learning that is evidence-based and built on tailored, long-term support with 'expert mentors'.
- Focusing professional development activities on enabling early years and primary school teachers to better identify and support children's language learning needs.
- Sharing good practice and adding to the evidence base of 'what works' for supporting language and communication in educational settings.

Key findings

Staff must be highly trained and well supported for universal language interventions to be effective. Yet, there continues to be a wide variability in practitioner understanding and confidence in supporting language learning needs.

Practitioners request more training, but many factors influence how training is translated into more effective practice.

SSLiC brings together practitioners and researchers to investigate how the evidence base related to language and communication might be applied to educational settings.

SSLiC was implemented in 8 nurseries and 12 primary schools across Bristol and Plymouth in the academic year 2022-2023.

Key findings include:

- Children's learning engagement increased over time. Children in nursery year demonstrated greater improvement in learning engagement than their peers in Reception, Year One and Year Two.
- Classroom learning environments improved over time, across three different dimensions: language learning environment, language learning opportunities and language learning interactions. Again, statistically significant differences were observed only in Nursery classrooms.
- Practitioners were overwhelmingly positive about the SSLiC Programme. Staff reported finding both the materials and professional development helpful, with the mentoring element identified as particularly supportive.
- Practitioners reported positive changes in their knowledge and understanding of how to improve their and their colleagues practice, as well as a better understanding of how to measure changes in their setting's language provision and evaluate the impact of their work. Although the aim of the SSLiC Programme was to develop practice, practitioners reported that participation facilitated improvements in direct pupil outcomes.

Further information

A final research report and three case studies booklets summarising work in Bristol, Plymouth and Venturers Trust Bristol settings can be found on the project page:

[Empowering educational professionals to create strong language provision in early and primary school settings](#)

Oracy All Party Parliamentary Group (2021) [Speak for Change: Final report and recommendations from the Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group Inquiry](#)

The Centre for Social Justice (2023) [Cracks in our Foundations: Addressing the longstanding attainment gap in England's primary schools](#)

Speech and Language UK [Speaking up for the Covid Generation](#)

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