



## Afasic's Response to the Oracy APPG's 2019 Inquiry:

### *Speaking for Change*

#### Introduction

1. Afasic is the UK-wide charity representing children and young people with DLD (Developmental Language Disorder). Afasic welcomes the opportunity to respond to this inquiry and would be happy to give oral evidence if desired.
2. DLD is the term used for children whose speech and/or language development is, for no obvious reason, slower than in other children or unusual in certain respects. Recent research has established that DLD affects 7%<sup>1</sup> of children, making it one of the most common forms of childhood disability.
3. Children with DLD may have difficulty with some or all of the following:
  - Speaking and articulating clearly
  - Understanding what they hear or read
  - Learning and remembering words, and putting words together to make sentences and paragraphs
  - Using and responding to language appropriately in context.
4. This can have a real impact on so many aspects of daily life and learning, including acquiring literacy and numeracy skills.

#### Summary

5. Oracy skills depend on a basic level of competence in speech and language. Most children acquire this naturally during their preschool years, but some do not, significantly affecting their learning potential and life chances.
6. Oracy is the 'must have' skill for our age, facilitating success in work and life more generally. People with poorer communication skills face social exclusion, an increased likelihood of mental health problems, and a higher risk of being drawn into the criminal justice system.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.lilac-lab.org/scales/>

7. There is a strong correlation between social class and oracy skills, with language ability being both cause and effect.

8. Language is the foundation of all learning and communication skills but is not prioritised enough within the education system, meaning that children with weaker skills fall behind.

9. Preschools and schools should systematically teach language skills. This would necessitate much better training in language development and ongoing support from on-site speech and language therapists.

10. The current education system pushes our children into formal learning before many of them are developmentally ready. We should imitate our European neighbours and delay formal schooling until the age of 6 to 7 years.

## About Speech and Language

11. This Inquiry's Terms of Reference define Oracy as being 'to speech what literacy is to writing and numeracy is to maths'. This is accurate but requires amplification.

12. The faculty of speech involves the following aspects:

- Being able to articulate correctly the sounds that make up words. These sounds are usually represented by letters or groups of letters in the written language. This process is often called 'speech' by speech and language therapists and language researchers.
- Learning, using and understanding words correctly
- Being able to form meaningful and grammatically accurate sentences
- Putting sentences together in longer utterances in a way that makes sense – being able to tell a joke or story, for example
- Using and responding to language appropriately, in context

13. Speech and language therapists and language researchers generally use the term 'language' for the last four processes. To the general public, however, the word 'language' tends to mean English, Welsh etc. This indicates considerable ignorance of the high number of processes involved in the faculty of speech, which illustrate how complicated it is. A basic level of competence in all of them needs to be in place to provide the foundation for the acquisition of good oracy skills.

14. There tends to be an assumption that everyone learns to speak by the time they start school but this isn't entirely true. A significant minority of children will have problems with one or more of the processes listed above, which may not be apparent to other people – language difficulties are very much a hidden disability. Nevertheless, even mild problems will impact on children's ability to acquire good oracy skills.

15. As a cognitive skill, language, like intelligence, is measured on a scale, with most people falling in the middle and a few on either edge. There tends to be a close correlation between the two scales as a high, or low, level in one reinforces and reflects the other<sup>2</sup>. As both are important factors in the acquisition of higher level skills such as literacy, numeracy and

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<sup>2</sup> <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED470647>

oracy, it is clear that some children are, right from the outset, better placed to learn these skills than others.

## Value and Impact

### Questions 2, 5, 7 and 8

*What are the consequences if children and young people do not receive oracy education?*

*What is the impact of quality oracy education on future life chances? Specifically, how does it affect employment and what value do businesses give oracy?*

*What is the value and impact of oracy education in relation to other key agendas such as social mobility and wellbeing/mental health?*

*How can the ability to communicate effectively contribute to engaging more young people from all backgrounds to become active citizens, participating fully in social action and public life as adults?*

16. People with good oracy skills tend to ‘come across’ well. This is invaluable for many aspects of modern life and it is probably no exaggeration to describe oracy as the ‘must have’ key skill of our age.

17. With the decline of heavy industry and the growth of the service and creative sectors, good communication skills are valued more than ever by employers<sup>3</sup>. The ability to articulate what you want to say accurately and succinctly is fundamental to participating successfully in meetings, project planning and other discussions. Oracy is also essential for forming and maintaining good working relationships with colleagues and clients, and making a positive impression at job interviews or in applications for university, college, or apprenticeship schemes.

18. Oracy is also valuable outside the world of work. People with good communication skills will be much more confident about making their voice heard on local issues or taking leadership roles in local organisations. Perhaps more importantly, they will be taken more seriously – which is particularly useful if you need to make a complaint, for example.

19. A lack of oracy skills, on the other hand, means fewer employment opportunities and worse prospects. It has even been argued that poor communication skills have adversely affected local economies, and sometimes even the UK’s economy as a whole<sup>4</sup>.

20. In other respects, too, life can be harder for people with poor communication skills. They are often looked down on, and not taken seriously. This makes them feel disempowered when dealing with authority figures, such as council officers, the police or even doctors and teachers, and excluded from decision-making processes in both public and private life. This often means a poorer quality of life, an increased incidence of mental health problems and a higher risk of being drawn into the criminal justice system.<sup>5</sup>

21. There is a strong correlation between social class and the level of oracy skills. This starts very young: the lower the social class, the higher the prevalence of delayed language. In part,

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<sup>3</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/5264002.stm>

<sup>4</sup> <https://preview.tinyurl.com/y4y5239d>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/media/540327/tct\\_talkingaboutgeneration\\_report\\_online.pdf](https://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/media/540327/tct_talkingaboutgeneration_report_online.pdf)

this is due to genetic factors and in part to a culture which does not value and foster language skills. Middle class families on the other hand, with a much more pro-oracy culture, can often compensate for weak language skills in their children, or, if the difficulties are serious, access professional support much more readily<sup>6</sup>.

22. Oracy skills are a key driver in social mobility, or the lack of it. Highly articulate people are much more likely to be taken seriously, access higher status jobs, and move up the class ladder. Conversely, people with poor language skills are more likely to drop down the class ladder, and/or remain stuck in social deprivation, reinforcing the prevalent low oracy culture.

23. Sadly, the impact of weak communication skills is not always understood by more articulate people and there is a tendency to blame people from socially deprived backgrounds for their difficulties<sup>7</sup>. While raising the general level of oracy skills and educating people (especially those in authority) about language development are not a panacea, they would go a long way to improving the lives of a lot of people who are currently stuck on the lower rungs of society.

### Questions 1, 3 and 4

*Given many teachers recognise the importance of oracy, why does spoken language not have the same status as reading and writing in our education system? Should it have the same status, and if so why?*

*What is the value and impact of quality oracy education at i) different life stages, ii) in different settings, and iii) on different types of pupils?*

*How can it help deliver the wider curriculum at school?*

24. Spoken language skills are so fundamental that oracy should have a high status at school – perhaps even higher than literacy. The reasons it doesn't are:

- Language is seen primarily as a preschool developmental skill that children learn naturally before they start school. Literacy, on the other hand is a taught skill. Most children don't just pick it up.
- As a result teachers are not given training in language acquisition or how to teach it, and many don't consider it to be their job.
- It's very difficult to objectively measure progress and outcomes in oracy skills and there are few tools available to teachers.

25. This is regrettable, as language is the medium used for teaching. Without adequate language skills, children will struggle with literacy, numeracy, history, science and everything else. This then leads to a breakdown in the usual feedback mechanism whereby learning new subject matter and skills itself reinforces and enhances children's existing language. The consequence over time is a growing gap in language skills between the more and less able.

26. It should be noted that literacy and oracy are not totally distinct skills. They both depend on language, and skill in one skill will usually reflect, and be reflected in the other. Thus, good language teaching should encompass both literacy and oracy as two sides of the same coin – yet all too often does not, for the reasons outlined above.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://preview.tinyurl.com/yyt444ah>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-12307846>

## Provision and Access

### Questions 9 and 13

*What should high quality oracy education look like?*

27. Children learn and develop language skills sequentially. So good language teaching should start where the individual child is and then gradually build up their skills in the right order and at the right time.

28. With younger children and those with weaker language skills, this means consolidating a good, basic vocabulary as well as ensuring they can form coherent sentences and respond appropriately to them. Once these fundamental communication skills are in place, the next stage is to develop children's narrative skills i.e. their ability to tell stories or relate incidents. Then, finally, children are ready to start learning and practising how to use language to make arguments, support theories, discuss future plans, persuade other people of their view - in a word, oracy<sup>8</sup>.

29. The key, but often ignored, professionals are speech and language therapists (SLTs). They understand language development, can measure children's language skills and achievement levels, and know how to stimulate further progress. In a word, SLTs focus on language **competence** (Is a child actually able to speak or write language at a certain level?), while teachers tend to focus on **performance** (how well did a child say or write something?). There is an overlap but also an important distinction.

30. The one thing that would make a huge difference to the language and oracy skills of our children, especially those with SEN and/or language-poor background, would be including at least one therapist on the staff of all schools (especially primary schools) and preschool settings<sup>9</sup>. At the moment, most schools and other settings can request SLT support for individual children from the local NHS, but the services are so stretched that the input they receive is extremely limited, and often inadequate<sup>10</sup>.

31. At the moment, children with weaker language skills are often given work they are not yet developmentally ready for – and not surprisingly find it a struggle. This is partly due to the inflexible nature of the curriculum, but also a consequence of teachers' poor understanding of language development<sup>11</sup>.

32. Children with DLD and other forms of SEN may also miss out on oracy education because:

- It is pitched at too high a level so they cannot contribute
- They are often taught outside the classroom by a TA so are unable to access many group activities and the level of interaction may be low. As a result, their already weak oracy skills may fall even further behind those of their classmates.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.teachthought.com/literacy/teaching-oral-communication-skills/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://blog.optimus-education.com/school-led-send-provision-speech-and-language-therapy>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.bercow10yearson.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/337644-ICAN-Bercow-Report-WEB.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <https://preview.tinyurl.com/gw5py66>

- They tend to keep quiet at school and teachers don't always encourage them to talk more or investigate their reticence. Partly this is because it is generally easier to teach most lessons if children are quiet, and so teachers tend to welcome this.
- Because talking is difficult, they try and avoid it and aren't necessarily encouraged to speak. There may be a tendency for teachers to focus on the more able children.
- In the case of children from poorer backgrounds, there may be a tendency for teachers to blame their weaker language skills on that fact.

### Questions 10 and 12

*Can you provide evidence of how oracy education is being provided in different areas/education settings/extra-curricular provision, by teachers but also other practitioners that work with children?*

*Where can we identify good practice and can you give examples?*

33. Language units are an excellent example of provision for children with significant language disorders. They are essentially a small class, attached to a mainstream school, staffed by teachers and teaching assistants with expertise in the field and a specialist speech and language therapist. This enables the staff to work as a team to deliver a modified curriculum that focuses in developing fundamental language skills – and enabling some to go on to develop a high level of oracy in time. Regrettably, they don't exist in every area, and more are urgently needed.

34. The small number of specialist schools for children with SLCN provide a highly personalised curriculum modified to meet the needs of children with severe speech and language difficulties. A team approach is used to teach and support the children with teachers, teaching assistants and speech and language therapists working together.

35. There are a number of resources and materials available for teaching language and oracy skills in mainstream classrooms and language units. These include:

- The Voice 21 Four Strands approach: <https://www.voice21.org/our-resources>
- Talk for Writing: <https://www.talk4writing.co.uk/>
- Language for Learning: <https://www.languageforlearning.co.uk>
- Word Aware and Language for Thinking: <http://thinkingtalking.co.uk/>

### Barriers

#### Question 15

*What are the barriers that teachers face to providing quality oracy education, within the education system and beyond?*

36. As explained above, teachers do not know enough about language and language development.

37. The current education system does not encourage a focus on oracy education<sup>12</sup>. Schools and teachers are measured largely by performance in SATs and GCSEs which are mainly written exams.

### Question 16

*What support do teachers need to improve the delivery of oracy education?*

38. There needs to be more systematic training for teachers on language development and how to teach language and oracy skills, with the support of speech and language therapists where required.

### Question 19

*What is the role of assessment in increasing provision of oracy education? What is the most appropriate form of assessment of oracy skills?*

39. Speech and language therapists have objective assessments which they use for periodic progress checks, but there are relatively few available to teachers. As a result teachers' assessments tend to be very subjective and risk providing inaccurate measures of progress. This reinforces the reliance on measuring literacy skills, which, in part, serves as a proxy for language skills in general (and mostly quite a successful one)<sup>13</sup>.

### Question 22

*Are there examples of other educational pedagogies where provision has improved and we can draw parallels and learn lessons?*

40. We can learn a lot from our European neighbours, where children don't start school until 6 or 7. In England, on the other hand, the Early Learning Goals already expect children to be able to read and write some words. Any expert will tell you that only a minority of five year olds are developmentally ready to do this. Not surprisingly, something like one-third of children have language skills that are rated as 'not yet at the level of development expected at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage. Yet, most receive no additional support so struggle with the Year 1 curriculum and may never catch up, ultimately forming much of the long tail of underachievement that persists in this country<sup>14</sup>.

41. There are two steps that could address this situation substantially:

- Providing appropriate and immediate support to all children who fail to meet the Early Years Foundation Stage targets. The state of Hamburg in Germany assesses all its five year-olds and any found to be behind in language and other developmental skills are given a year-long booster course to get them 'school ready'<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://preview.tinyurl.com/jzlxbbb>

<sup>13</sup> <https://preview.tinyurl.com/y5zz4hfk>

<sup>14</sup> <https://preview.tinyurl.com/zq6uyyb>

<sup>15</sup> <https://preview.tinyurl.com/y4rw7snc>

- Put the school starting age back a year so that children do not start formal learning until the age of 6. This would enable children who are developing more slowly to acquire the basic skills needed for formal learning and would give them a much better chance of succeeding at school.

42. According to a recent research project, teachers in Italy are trained in language development<sup>16</sup>. As language is so fundamental to learning, this should also form part of standard teacher training in the UK.

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<sup>16</sup> *A Review of Teaching for the new Industrial Age*, Rosemary Sage and Riccarda Matteucci, University of Buckingham, 2019