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## APPG Oracy Inquiry: Speak for Change

### Evidence from Dr Jessie Ricketts (Royal Holloway, University of London) and Dr Laura Shapiro (Aston University)

It is important to consider oracy within the broader framework of language that includes other aspects of spoken language (listening) and written language (reading, writing). Like writing, oracy involves producing language, and complements listening and reading, where language is received so that it can be understood. Promoting oracy is important in its own right, and also feeds into proficiency in other aspects of language. Equally, other components of language play an important role in supporting oracy. For example, reading provides exposure to complex words and grammatical constructions that are not encountered in everyday conversations. We wholly support the call for more emphasis to be placed on oracy in schools. However, it is important that any developments in support and instruction for oracy are integrated with, and complement, existing literacy instruction.

Our research<sup>12</sup> focuses on vocabulary knowledge and reading as pupils progress through primary and secondary school. Both vocabulary knowledge and reading will feed into oracy. Since words are the building blocks of language, limited vocabulary knowledge will be a barrier to effective talk. Since reading provides vital opportunities for language development, reading difficulties present a barrier to oracy. In secondary school, demands on oracy are high, yet teachers report that they do not have the knowledge and resources that they need to support oracy effectively. In what follows, we will detail key findings and their implications for oracy in schools.

**Key finding 1. Low vocabulary knowledge and reading skills present a barrier to oracy** We cannot assume that pupils in upper primary and secondary school have the vocabulary knowledge that they need to support oracy. Our research shows very low levels of vocabulary and reading proficiency for a small but significant number of children. This presents an enormous challenge for teachers in trying to ensure that all pupils know and can use words while talking. Talking to teachers has shown that teachers focus on supporting curriculum-specific words (tier 3 words like photosynthesis) and can overestimate knowledge of other more everyday or general words (e.g. tier 1 words like cat, tier 2 words like compare). Further support and training would allow teachers to know more about the kinds of words that their pupils might not know so that they can check knowledge and teach unknown words.

**Key finding 2. Gaps in vocabulary knowledge and reading are persistent but not widening** Our research shows that vocabulary knowledge and reading are extremely variable. Though there are wide gaps between the highest and lowest attainers, these gaps aren't widening as pupils progress from primary to secondary and through the first years of secondary school. Whilst it is good news that gaps aren't widening, there remains huge variation between pupils, presenting a significant challenge for teachers who strive to support those with the greatest need, whilst also promoting talk that is demanding and stimulating for the most able.

**Key finding 3. Progress is most rapid early in primary, although children continue to make progress in upper primary and secondary**

Pupils make significant progress in vocabulary and reading as they move from primary to secondary school, and through the first years of secondary (Key Stages 2 and 3). However, progress is less rapid than earlier in the school system (Early Years and Key Stage 1). The Early Years and Key Stage 1 curricula emphasise support for the foundations of literacy and spoken language. However, this emphasis lessens as you move up the school system. Our findings suggest that children would make greater progress with more focus on supporting oracy, listening, reading and writing in Key Stages 2 and 3 (and beyond). In addition, while it is not feasible to close the wide language gaps that exist, a combination of targeted and classroom support could narrow gaps. Importantly, we must build on the Early Years and Key Stage 1 curriculum to ensure continuity across primary and secondary education.

In upper primary and secondary school, demands on language, including oracy, are high. Yet, teachers report that they do not have the knowledge and resources that they need to support language effectively. This includes not only oracy, but also knowledge and resources to support listening, reading and writing as well. We must ensure that initial teacher education and continuing professional development build capacity in language needs and language development. There is also a need for more evidence-informed resources that provide practical strategies and tools for teachers. We must build on recent progress, like changes to teacher knowledge and confidence through the Blackpool Key Stage 3 Literacy Project<sup>3</sup> and the influence of Educational Endowment Foundation guidance reports on teacher training<sup>4</sup>.



<http://pc.rhul.ac.uk/sites/lara/> [http://bit.ly/Aston\\_Literacy\\_Project](http://bit.ly/Aston_Literacy_Project)

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<sup>1</sup> Ricketts, J., Dawson, N., Taylor, L., Lervåg, A., & Hulme, C. (2020). Reading and oral vocabulary development in early adolescence. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 24(5), 380-396.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10888438.2019.1689244>

<sup>2</sup> Cunningham, A. J., Burgess, A. P., Witton, C., Talcott, J. B., & Shapiro, L. R. (2021). Dynamic relationships between phonological memory and reading: a five year longitudinal study from age 4 to 9. *Developmental science*, 24(1)  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/desc.12986>

<sup>3</sup> <https://righttosucceed.org.uk/working-collectively/key-stage-3-literacy-project/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/tools/guidance-reports/improving-literacy-in-secondary-schools/>