

**National
Literacy
Trust**

Change your story

Creating confident communicators:

**How the government can help
every child find their voice**

Contents

Foreword	5
First steps for change	6
Introduction	8
Defining oracy	9
Section 1: Early speech, language and communication	10
Early Words Matter	11
Early Words Together	11
Section 2: The learning continuum	12
Developing oracy in key stage 1 and key stage 2	13
AI in education	13
West Yorkshire Young Poet Laureate Programme	14
Section 3: Wellbeing, advocacy and belonging	15
Criminal justice	15
Represent	16
Section 4: Employability	17
Words for Work	18
Section 5: Policy recommendations	20
Early years	20
School	21
Post-16	21
Conclusion	22
Annex	23
References	24

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Foreword

Reading has been a source of profound joy for me since childhood. It has allowed me to escape into various worlds, from ancient realms to futuristic landscapes where animals can talk, and computers govern everything. This joy should be a universal right, for reading is far more than a simple pastime – it is a gateway to independence, self-improvement, and a richer life.

Extensive research underscores the deep connection between language and literacy in shaping young minds. Children who struggle with language at age five are six times more likely to fall behind in reading and writing by the age of 11.

I have seen firsthand how improving children's oracy skills can boost their academic performance and confidence, leading to a more positive outlook on life, raised aspirations and a greater willingness to contribute to the lives of those around them.

Unfortunately, the pandemic has widened the literacy gap between children from disadvantaged communities and their more affluent peers. In my work across various organisations, I have tirelessly advocated for the voiceless, striving to empower children with the communication skills that they need in order to have a positive impact on society. Bringing stories to life through different voices and accents breathes colour and vitality into literature, illuminating the author's true intent. I am heartened that this report aims to further this goal.

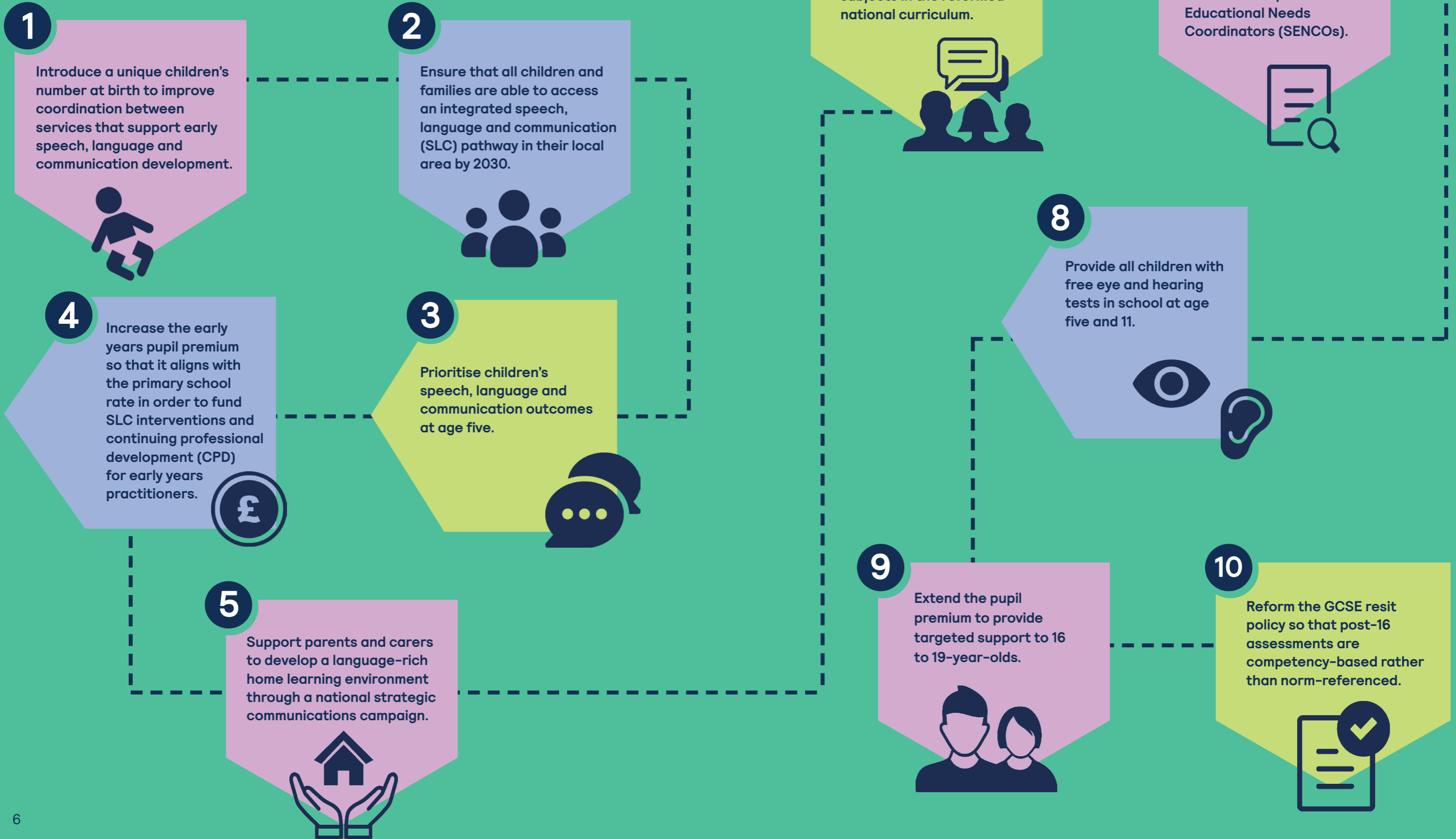
Every child, regardless of their background, should be empowered to find, develop and express their authentic voice. We must work together to build a prosperous and sustainable world for all children, not just a privileged few.

Hon. Dr Stuart Lawrence



First steps for change:

Policy proposals from early years to employment



Introduction

The government has announced a review of the curriculum and assessment system. The goal is to deliver a curriculum that is rich and broad, inclusive and innovative, and which develops children's knowledge and skills. In doing so, the government has promised to consult widely to ensure that it is drawing on relevant expertise.

At the National Literacy Trust, we define literacy as the ability to read, write, speak and listen in a way that enables us to communicate effectively and make sense of the world. This report outlines our proposals for how the government can better support the development of these skills from birth to the age of 18. The catalyst for this work was the Independent Commission on the Future of Oracy Education, hosted by Voice 21. Our intention is for this report to be a constructive contribution to an important national debate.

Our argument is quite simple: if, as a country, we want more young people to leave the education system with confident speaking skills, then they need to be able to access an integrated pathway of speech, language and communication support from birth to 18. Whilst the school curriculum is important, what happens before school – in a child's first 1,001 days – is critical. The Secretary of State for Education, Bridget Phillipson MP, recognises this, as she stated in a recent speech that the early years is her "number one priority" (Phillipson quoted in Busby, 2024).

That is why, in section 1, we begin by explaining why children's early speech, language and communication development is important. Section 2 builds on this foundation by arguing for the integration of spoken language through an inclusive national curriculum. Section 3 takes a step back to discuss the wider benefits of oracy education, such as the positive impact that it can have on children's wellbeing and sense of belonging. Section 4 explains why confident communication skills are key for employability and career progression. Finally, in section 5, we reflect on the implications of the evidence in order to propose a set of policy recommendations.



Defining oracy

We define oracy as the range of skills and techniques used to express thoughts verbally, including how well we listen, understand and can respond. Strong oracy skills enable individuals to articulate their ideas, opinions and understanding to others in a clear and compelling manner.

We believe that every child deserves a high-quality oracy education, as it is the key to developing the literacy skills that are needed to thrive in the modern world. Children should be taught explicitly how to express their thoughts, learn, collaborate, listen with understanding and empathy, engage critically with the world around them, seek clarification or further information, and advocate for their civic rights and the rights of others. They should have opportunities to celebrate the language(s) that they speak, develop confidence in communicating across difference settings, registers and genres, and learn how to build and maintain happy and healthy relationships.

It is important to note that, in line with our charity's place-based model of working, we do not presume that 'strong oracy skills' means speaking with a particular accent, dialect or even language. Rather, we believe in the power of authentic self-expression.

Every child – irrespective of their background – should be empowered to find, develop and express their voice.



Section 1: Early speech, language and communication

Language and literacy are inextricably linked. Literacy emerges from a solid foundation of oral language development, which is cultivated through interactive conversational turn-taking, exposure to a varied vocabulary via songs, rhymes, books and stories, and consistent dialogic reading habits (see Clark, 2016). The quality of children's early language experiences is a powerful predictor of their future educational achievement across the curriculum, not just in those subjects closely related to language (Law et al., 2017; Roy et al., 2014).

Numerous research studies have shown that exposure to oral language and interaction in the early years shapes children's cognitive development and subsequent academic attainment (e.g., Weinert, 2022; Gibson et al., 2020; Bleses et al., 2016; Roulstone et al., 2011). The Education Endowment Foundation's Early Years Toolkit (2023) states that young children who are explicitly supported with their communication and language development make approximately seven months' additional progress over the course of a year, with some studies showing even larger gains for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Law et al.'s (2017) findings indicate that children's oral language skills support their reading and writing ability, and Melby-Lervåg et al.'s (2012) research shows that there is a causal link between phonemic awareness and letter knowledge in learning how to decode written materials. Spoken language, therefore, unlocks reading.

Yet, recent research conducted by Pro Bono Economics – on behalf of KPMG UK and the National Literacy Trust – identified that there were 106,000 five-year-olds in England in a single year group who did not meet the expected level of literacy but reasonably could have if they had been provided with the right early support (see Rodriguez Cabrera et al., 2024). This lack of investment in early speech, language and communication has an economic cost; £830m over the lifetime of each cohort, or £7,800 per child on average. This is because low literacy

limits employment opportunities and earnings, which can have a negative impact on health and wellbeing. Together, these factors establish the mechanism for the intergenerational transmission of poverty (see Raffo et al., 2007).

The process through which a child learns to communicate is complex. However, the evidence is clear: what matters most to children's early speech, language and communication outcomes is the quality of the home learning environment (Melhuish, 2010). This encompasses both the physical characteristics of the home and the quality of the learning support that is provided by parents or carers. Families living in poverty are far less likely to have the resources or the capabilities to create language-rich home learning environments. That is why the National Literacy Trust has recently launched our Early Words Matter campaign. We look forward to collaborating with public, private and voluntary sector partners to maximise our collective impact.



Early Words Matter

Early Words Matter is the National Literacy Trust's pioneering, five-year campaign to support 250,000 children with their oracy and literacy skills development. Early Words Matter comprises flagship programmes and community outreach in 20 areas with low levels of literacy and high levels of socio-economic deprivation.

Early Words Matter aims to:

1. Raise awareness of the importance of early speech, language and communication development in shaping children's future life outcomes.
2. Deliver practical support, resources and training for the early years sector by reaching directly into the community through local organisations, businesses and community leaders.
3. Empower parents by helping them support their child's speech, language and communication development at home.
4. Persuade the government to invest in high-quality early childhood education, and prioritise the joining up of early education, family support, health services and community and voluntary organisations, in order to create an integrated early years system that offers consistent support for children from birth to school.



Early Words Together

Oracy lies at the heart of Early Words Together – a programme that sits under the umbrella of the Early Words Matter campaign. Early Words Together supports the communication, language and early literacy of children aged three to four through evidence-based activities to improve the quality of their home learning environment. Since 2011, Early Words Together has supported over 9,000 families in over 50 local authorities, focusing on areas of high socio-economic deprivation.

We work with families, practitioners and community organisations to improve their confidence and understanding of children's early speech and language development and support lasting positive changes to children's home learning environments. We also foster partnerships between practitioners and families, between practitioners in communities of practice, and between local systems.

Two independent evaluations of the programme have highlighted the value of placing oracy at the heart of literacy skills development (OPM Group, 2016; Wood et al., 2015). The evaluations showed that:

- Parents reported talking more to their child and encouraging them to talk.
- Families who started the programme with the lowest levels of reading enjoyment showed a 77% increase in enjoyment of sharing and reading books.
- Families who started with the lowest frequency of book sharing showed a 91% increase in reading frequency.

Additional reporting on the programme has also demonstrated that, for multilingual families, Early Words Together helps to strengthen parental engagement, increase children's speaking and listening confidence, and celebrate the use of their home language(s) to develop oracy skills, as well as English. Furthermore, families have reported chatting, playing and reading together more often at home, and primary school teachers have reported multilingual children being more confident in the classroom (for examples, see National Literacy Trust, 2024a; National Literacy Trust, 2024b).

Section 2:

The learning continuum

Embedding oracy education in the early years is necessary but not sufficient. There is a compelling body of evidence that highlights the connection between oral development, cognitive development and educational attainment. Children who struggle with spoken language at age five are six times more likely to fall below the expected level in reading and writing at age 11 (Save the Children, 2011). Research indicates that this trend continues through to GCSE level and beyond (Law et al., 2017).

While there are diverse – often strongly held – views on the relative strengths and weaknesses of different national curricula, we think that it is a useful starting point to compare and contrast the English curriculum with those of the three devolved nations.

Oracy is cited as a cross-cutting competency for all age groups in the Curriculum for Wales, the Curriculum for Excellence (Scotland) and the Northern Ireland Curriculum. Conversely, in England, ‘spoken language’ is only mentioned once in the Early Years Framework and is scarcely referenced in the national curriculum for key stages 1–4. Ofsted’s English subject report (2024) states that oral composition is undervalued as a part of the process of learning to write independently and effectively at primary and secondary level, and notes that schools (often) do not explicitly consider spoken language in their English curriculum, despite a general level of understanding amongst teachers that spoken language underpins pupils’ reading and writing development.

At the National Literacy Trust, we believe that oracy should be integrated through all education phases and subjects of the national curriculum, as spoken language has a mutually reinforcing relationship with children’s reading and writing skills development. Our school improvement team substantiates this view through our provision of CPD for school leaders and teachers. We stress the importance of developing pupils’ reading, writing, speaking and listening skills within subjects – what is

known as ‘disciplinary literacy’. For example, our Talk for Learning CPD module highlights best practice examples for developing pupils’ oracy skills within different subject domains.

This ‘talk-rich’ pedagogical approach is based on robust evidence. The Education Endowment Foundation’s (2017) Dialogic Teaching Project demonstrated increased engagement and attainment in English, maths and science. Similarly, an evaluation of SAPERE’s Philosophy for Children randomised control trial reported significant gains in test scores for children in upper primary school. Notably, using oracy in the classroom was found to be especially beneficial for the development of children from disadvantaged communities (EEF, 2019). A more central role for oracy-based learning in the curriculum could thus promote equity in education and help to narrow the disadvantage gap.

For this promise to be realised, oracy education must consider the diverse communication needs of all children. Over 1.6 million pupils in England have special educational needs, with speech, language and communication needs most prevalent (Department for Education, 2024a). Furthermore, the 2023 Wales schools’ census showed that, for the first time, speech, language and communication needs are the most common additional learning need among learners in Wales (Welsh Government, 2023). As such, a one-size-fits-all approach will exclude children with developmental language disorders, who stammer, are autistic, or deaf (Wright et al., 2024). Inclusive implementation is critical.

It is also important to note that, in England, ‘spoken language’ commonly refers to development in relation to Standard English. This focus is highly contested. At the National Literacy Trust, we celebrate linguistic diversity by taking a place-based, context-led approach to children’s oracy development. We value variation in accents, dialects and languages spoken.

Rather than holding every child to outdated expectations of Standard English, we suggest that learning how to adapt the way that spoken language is used in different situations – i.e., the ability to ‘code-switch’ – is a highly important skill to develop (for discussion, see Cuddy, 2022). We should not be encouraging children to ‘lose’ their authentic local accents, telling them their dialect is ‘ungrammatical’, or insisting they speak Standard English in all situations. Instead, we should support children to develop their understanding of how they can vary their spoken language so that it is appropriate to different situations.

An inclusive curriculum should empower every child to find, develop and express their authentic voice, rather than reducing spoken language repertoires to uniform Standard English varieties. A curriculum that celebrates linguistic diversity would also offer pupils the opportunity to learn more about language variation, where languages come from, and how they have changed over time.

We think that this can be achieved without compromising the rigour of England’s national curriculum. The strict dichotomy between skills and knowledge is a false one, drawn from a narrow interpretation of what ‘knowledge’ means. The tension between the highly specified nature of the national curriculum and the more loosely defined ‘knowledge curriculum’ could be productively examined in the government’s review. The goal should be to integrate opportunities for speech, language and communication skills development through all phases and subjects, so they become cross-cutting competencies, whilst ensuring that children still learn about “the best which has been thought and said” (Arnold, 1869).

Developing oracy in key stage 1 and key stage 2

This blended CPD programme explores the evidence base for investing in talk-rich approaches across England’s primary curriculum, so that English and literacy leads are better positioned to advocate for the development of oracy in their settings.

The programme reflects and refers to the Education Endowment Foundation’s guidance reports for the primary phases and offers time and capacity-strained teachers a strategic approach to prioritising oracy and enhancing reading comprehension.

Our training focuses on developing oracy skills and reading comprehension in tandem and is grounded in the use of ‘book talk’ (Chambers, 2011) and Critical Thinking and Book Talk (Roche, 2014). We use this approach due to the heavy demands of the primary national curriculum, and the ways in which primary statutory testing currently drives curriculum and pedagogic choices, particularly for English and maths.

AI in education

When discussing curriculum and assessment reform, it is important to consider the adequacy, direction and resilience of skills we want to cultivate in the next generation. Children and young people should be equipped with the knowledge and competencies needed to navigate and respond to a rapidly changing technological landscape. Mastery of new digital tools, including generative artificial intelligence (AI), will require not only strong foundational literacy skills, but also complex critical, digital and media literacy skills (McKnight, 2021). The definition of what it means to be literate is evolving. Therefore, the education system must adapt.

Technological advancement will drive innovation in education. For example, generative AI could enhance personalisation of learning and reduce teacher workload by supporting lesson planning, resource adaptation, assessment, and the automation of routine writing tasks (Department for Education, 2023a). While the impact of AI could be transformative, it is important to remain grounded, recognising the ethical and environmental implications of using AI tools and the indispensable role of teachers in supporting children’s learning.

Many commentators assert that clear, persuasive, and empathetic communication skills will become even more valuable in the digital age (Marr, 2023), as the voice is a ‘particularly human technology’ (Coleman, 2024), and speaking and listening is an ‘essential human skill’ (Barton, as cited by Whittaker, 2023).

The National Literacy Trust has established a working group to explore how the education system may need to adapt to the impact of generative AI. We are conducting extensive research with children, young people, teachers, academics, and business and industry leaders to examine how AI is influencing what it means to be literate in the digital age and to identify the literacy skills that will be of most benefit to individuals, society and the economy in the future. Our work aims to anticipate and prepare for possible changes to the assessment system, such as increased use of oral assessments and written summative assessments. We will share our findings on AI and assessment reform as our research progresses.

West Yorkshire Young Poet Laureate Programme

In 2023, the National Literacy Trust partnered with the Mayor of West Yorkshire, Tracy Brabin, and National Poet Laureate, Simon Armitage, the West Yorkshire Combined Authority and the National Poetry Centre to inspire the next generation of young poets. We hosted a week of poet-led school activities and a competition to appoint the first-ever Young Poet Laureates for West Yorkshire.

The competition entries were judged in two categories: Year 4 and Years 9–10. Alina Brdar, now aged 10, from Dewsbury, was the winner of the Year 4 category. Isabelle Walker, now aged 16, from Bradford, was the winner of the Year 9–10 category. Alina and Isabelle were then commissioned by Mayor Tracy Brabin to compose poems on the theme ‘Northern’. Both poems demonstrated the value of linguistic diversity by highlighting the competition winners’ authentic voices, dialects and identities. We have shared Alina’s poem below.

My North

Alina Brdar

My North, we love a cuppa at three,
 With a biccie, especially at three,
 Scarborough, Whitby and Filey,
 All my summers at the sea.
 Love to use a Mayors fare,
 To get to Millennium Square,
 Shop around, if you dare,
 Trinity Horse, can’t help but stare!
 So much to explore, great cities and green,
 Bolton Abbey, York cobbles and castles the best I’ve seen.
 Many Mills and textiles that have been,
 Rich in culture, history and cuisine.
 Must have a Yorkshire roast with a pud,
 Gravy and trimmings, yes, we would,
 Yorkshire mix, scones and butties – yes, you should,
 Fish and chips with bits all day... yes, we would!!!



Section 3:

Wellbeing, advocacy and belonging

Oracy is not only an educational activity, but a social and cultural one. Spoken language is crucial for successfully navigating social interactions and different cultural contexts. Strong oracy skills enable children and young people to express their feelings, advocate for their beliefs, and build and maintain healthy relationships.

The importance of these ‘non-academic’ benefits cannot be overstated. Education does not occur in a vacuum. Since the pandemic, school attendance rates have fallen (Department for Education, 2024b), the number of pupils being suspended and permanently excluded from schools has risen (Department for Education, 2024c), and the incidence and severity of mental health issues among children and adolescents has increased.

In evidence submitted to the Speak for Change enquiry (2021), the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists noted a link between weak spoken communication skills and low levels of wellbeing, and an association between early language problems and anxiety disorders among adults. The evidence also highlighted that nearly half of the 10% of children under the age of 16 with clinically significant mental health illness were assessed to have speech, language and communication needs (Speak for Change, 2021).

This correlation makes sense, as oracy skills enable young people to communicate their feelings effectively, engage in inquiry, practise active listening and empathy, and manage conflict. Without these skills, young people may externalise their emotional processing through aggression and physicality, which can lead to school exclusions. Alternatively, young people may internalise their feelings, and become muted or absent from school. Neither path supports the building and maintenance of healthy relationships. Without

a positive network of relationships, feelings of isolation, frustration and low self-esteem can take root, leading to deteriorating mental health. In addition, a lack of oracy skills can prevent young people from accessing clinical therapies that rely on spoken communication (Norbury, 2016), such that their mental health may deteriorate further.

The implication is that better oracy education could have wider societal benefits. Equipping young people with oracy skills may help them to navigate the personal and professional challenges of adult life. Furthermore, Holmes-Henderson et al. (2022) argue that the ability to listen actively and critically, analyse and reflect upon others’ spoken language, understand and present alternative viewpoints, and speak strategically to influence or persuade are all particularly pertinent to advocacy in a democratic society. As such, the development of oracy skills could help to address the rising tide of political polarisation by promoting healthy civic engagement. The implication of the above evidence is that developing strong oracy skills can also help young people understand collective decision-making by using exploratory talk and inquiry-based language to discuss, compare and shape agendas before reaching a consensus (Mercer, 2015).

Criminal justice

The National Literacy Trust’s work in the criminal justice system, in both Young Offender Institutions and prisons, underlines the importance of being heard in order to feel a sense of recognition and belonging.

We enhance the oracy skills of individuals in custody through initiatives like Inside Stories with Audible. This programme teaches young people podcast-making and audio production skills, allowing them to create an original piece of audio content over six sessions. Participants can explore areas of audio that interest them, producing original songs, radio interviews,

and discussion sessions on topics that they care about. Throughout the programme, they develop speaking and listening skills by interviewing guests, telling stories, and performing their work. The final audio is then shared more widely, either through National Prison Radio broadcasts or on Spotify, thanks to our partnership with Finding Rhythms. Overall, 100% of programme participants reported that the training enabled them to have their voice heard.

Our New Chapters project also empowers young people and adults in custody to express themselves through creative writing. Sessions, often led by inspiring authors, provide participants with a safe and supportive environment in which they can write for pleasure. At the end of each session, participants have the opportunity to share their work with staff and peers. This is a hugely important moment in sessions and aims to make participants feel acknowledged and celebrated. Participants are also invited to submit their work to our annual New Chapters anthology, which features contributions from multiple prisons and includes public feedback that is shared with the writers. Sessions are also regularly recorded by National Prison Radio, broadcasting participants' writing across the prison estate. 78% of New Chapters participants reported that the project made them feel their story is worth sharing, and 74% said it inspired them to tell their own story.

Represent

The National Literacy Trust's Represent programme supports girls aged 11 to 14 who are excluded from, or who are at risk of exclusion from, mainstream secondary school. The programme is delivered through 10 one-hour sessions and focuses on texts and activities that scaffold oracy and engage participants in discussions about issues that particularly affect this demographic of girls. The programme culminates with participants producing a social action project on a topic that is important to them.

The small groups, which use a talk-trio structure, provide a safe environment for participants to build the confidence required to discuss their views on the content. Participants take on different roles during discussions to encourage consideration of views different from their own and to foster more attentive listening and reflection on how others might think differently to them, supporting the formation of relationships. Programme resources are

designed to provide a stimulus to empathy, understanding and discussion, with the 'emotion wheel' resource allowing students to understand and express their feelings. Through this focus on emotional vocabulary, discussions also support emotional regulation by providing an outlet for self-expression. Overall, this creates an inclusive learning environment that strengthens teacher-student relationships as well as student-student relationships, ensuring that every voice is valued. The social action strand enables students to have their voices heard specifically about issues that are important to them, contributing to a sense of agency.

Evaluation of Represent and feedback from participants revealed the positive impact of using spoken discussion to develop communication skills and the importance of being required to reflect on views that are different from their own. Through doing so, participants reported being able to build friendships that they wouldn't otherwise have formed and explained that this experience positively impacted their self-confidence and wellbeing. The focus on emotional vocabulary also fostered emotional regulation through self-expression. Quantitative evaluation of the programme reinforced the qualitative insights; the results showed statistically significant increases in participants' self-reported wellbeing in both Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale and sliding scale measures. In light of this, the evaluation explicitly recommended that an 'oracy first' approach be continued with this demographic (National Literacy Trust, 2023).



Section 4: Employability

Communication skills are a priority for employers. They enable individuals to express and advocate for their ideas in various workplace contexts and are fundamental for effective teamwork. Practices of empathy, active listening, and the use of inquiring language to understand another's ideas and reach decisions are all facets of oracy which are key to successful collaborative work.

However, in 2022, Teach First found that 72% of employers were either 'fairly concerned' or 'very concerned' about the level of soft skills – such as communication and presentation – amongst school, college and university leavers. Given the high importance that many employers place on soft skills, access to employment can depend as much on linguistic and communication abilities as on formal qualifications. This can entrench 'social immobility', as poor oracy skills are disproportionately concentrated among young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, making it even more difficult for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to secure sustained employment.

Thankfully, many employers recognise and are working hard to address this injustice. The National Literacy Trust's corporate partners understand that supporting the skills development of young people is a 'cradle to career' endeavour that is the responsibility of all, not just those working directly in the education sector. This year, 109 businesses have signed up to the Vision for Literacy Business Pledge and publicly endorsed the goals of the Early Words Matter campaign. The campaign is being spearheaded by the Literacy and Business Council – which consists of senior executives from businesses as diverse as KPMG UK, Greggs, WHSmith, and The Very Group.



Strong communication and language skills are pivotal to building a successful career – allowing us to develop strong relationships, articulate complex ideas, and collaborate effectively with clients and colleagues. Business has a valuable part to play in helping young people develop the skills they need to reach their full potential. We are proud to support the National Literacy Trust's Early Words Matter campaign, which helps young people develop the language and literacy skills they need for the future.

Rachel Hopcroft CBE, Head of Corporate Affairs, KPMG UK



We recognise that strong literacy and oracy skills are not just academic achievements, but critical tools for employability and career progression. Speech, language and communication skills form the foundation of effective customer interaction, teamwork and leadership, making them vital for securing employment and excelling in our dynamic retail environment. Our partnership with the National Literacy Trust aligns perfectly with our company purpose as we both strive to equip future generations with the essential skills and knowledge they need to thrive through life.

Debbie Jamieson, Chief Retail and People Officer, The Works



Words for Work

The National Literacy Trust's Words for Work programme provides pupils in primary, key stage 3, key stage 4 and post-16 settings with opportunities to practise their spoken communication skills in workplace contexts through teacher-led activities and engagement with corporate volunteers. Our implementation of this programme begins at the primary level through activities that get pupils thinking about and articulating their aspirations for the future. At the secondary level, the programme blends interview, pitching and presentation skills with formal writing skills in order to take a holistic approach to equipping pupils with the literacy skills needed for success at work.

The feedback on Words for Work has been overwhelmingly positive. In a recent evaluation of the key stage 4 programme, 98% of participants reported gaining a better understanding of workplace communication and 99% reported that they would feel more confident in an interview context. This feedback strongly indicates that pupils value opportunities to practise their oracy skills in authentic contexts with employers. These opportunities are essential for readying young people with the confidence and spoken language skills needed to access employment and succeed in the workplace.

The National Literacy Trust's corporate partners play a significant role in supporting Words for Work by funding the project in local schools, hosting visits to their sites and providing staff volunteers. Recognising the importance of spoken communication for success in the workplace and the effectiveness of Words for Work for developing these skills, David Adair, Director of Community Engagement at PwC, commented that: "Confidence in verbal communication is one of the key skills that businesses look for when recruiting. The National Literacy Trust's Words for Work programme, which we are proud supporters of, is an excellent way for young people to work with business volunteers in order to gain the practical literacy and communication skills they need to reach their full potential."



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As a hiring manager at the BBC, speech, language and communication skills are a major factor in assessing a potential candidate's employability. Never underestimate the power of being able to speak on the phone and communicate effectively in meetings!

Joe McCulloch, Executive Producer, BBC Tiny Happy People

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The strength of a candidate's oral communication plays a pivotal role both in their success in securing that first job, but also in advocating for themselves and progressing their career at a later stage. Publishing is a business built on the strength of its relationships and so oracy skills will always be valued highly. We are proud supporters of the National Literacy Trust and it's fantastic to see their Early Words Matter campaign bring attention to the link between language and literacy.

Briony Grogan, Director of People and Culture, Pan Macmillan

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At Irwin Mitchell, our work relies on building strong relationships with our clients, colleagues and wider communities, and being able to communicate well plays an important role in that. We recognise that some people need extra support developing oracy skills, and the confidence to use them, and that's why we're committed to supporting the National Literacy Trust's mission.

Kate Fergusson, Director of Sustainability and Responsible Business, Irwin Mitchell Group

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Businesses need employees with well-developed literacy skills, who can explain things clearly, support recommendations with evidence, and understand the importance of tailoring their communication style for different audiences. The foundations for good communication are laid at the earliest point in a child's development. That is why WHSmith is supporting the National Literacy Trust's Early Words Matter campaign, to help develop children's literacy and language skills in those crucial first years.

Nicki Woodhead, Sustainability Director, WHSmith

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Section 5:

Policy recommendations

This section provides a roadmap for policy reform that, if implemented with sufficient funding and consideration, will advance the Prime Minister’s ambition to “put confident speaking skills at the heart of what we teach our children” (Starmer in Wingate, 2024). We have chosen to structure our policy recommendations by educational phase and, given the variance between the four nations, limit the geographic scope to the English education system.

Early years

In October 2023, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy published *Building Firm Foundations: A report on early language and communication policy*. This report, which was produced by the National Literacy Trust with input from other expert organisations, outlined a series of pertinent evidence-based early years policy recommendations.

The report’s overarching recommendation is that every child should be able to access an integrated speech, language and communication (SLC) pathway in their local area. This pathway should reflect and embed the features that underpin successful place-based approaches to system change. There should be a strategic focus on prevention through the early identification of children at risk of speech and language difficulties. This focus will require greater coordination between education, health, children’s social care and specialist support services, such as speech and language therapists. The planned introduction of a unique identification number for all children from birth is, therefore, a welcome first step for change. However, the extent to which this reform translates to sustainable improvements in children’s outcomes will ultimately depend on the quality of system leadership and the capacity of local and central government to facilitate closer coordination. This capacity is currently lacking as a consequence of austerity.

A shift towards mission-driven government, with greater devolution of power, could act as a catalyst for joined-up policymaking and strategic investment. We recommend that a key target of the ‘opportunity mission’ is to improve children’s SLC outcomes at age five. This would ensure that more children start school with the skills that they need to learn. The government should use the forthcoming Comprehensive Spending Review to drive this change by moving towards the use of long-term, integrated funding settlements. To illustrate, a Combined Mayoral Authority, such as Greater Manchester, could be given a sizeable financial investment and tasked with improving children’s SLC outcomes at age five by 2030. This would empower local areas by giving them the flexibility to innovate over the means of delivery. Our charity’s place-based way of working has shown us that local leaders often have a better understanding of what their area needs to shift the dial on children’s outcomes than people working in Whitehall.

The Department for Education should instead focus on implementing complementary reforms to boost the capacity and capability of the early years sector. For example, an increase to the early years pupil premium (EYPP) rate would significantly boost the sector’s ability to provide pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds with targeted SLC support. Specifically, we recommend that the EYPP rate is increased fourfold, so it is in line with the rate that is currently allocated to primary school-aged children from disadvantaged communities. This would cost, approximately, an additional £150m per annum. Whilst we recognise that this is not an insignificant increase in funding, we think that there is compelling evidence that the long-run social and economic benefits justify the fiscal cost.

A higher EYPP would have benefits beyond boosting direct delivery of SLC interventions. It would remove some of the barriers to early years settings providing places to children in areas of disadvantage, or to children with SEND. It would also enable more early years practitioners to engage in ongoing continuous professional development (CPD) to enhance their understanding of speech, communication and language development. This CPD should emphasise the importance of working in partnership with families to support them to build a language-rich home learning environment, and empower practitioners to access, understand and implement evidence-based interventions.

In addition, the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care should grow their investment in Start for Life as a strategic behaviour change campaign that promotes to parents the importance of the home learning environment. This campaign should be delivered through a multi-sector partnership that builds on existing successful initiatives, such as the BBC’s Tiny Happy People campaign.

School

The government’s curriculum and assessment review is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to integrate speech, language and communication skills development in the school system in England. The National Literacy Trust’s work on disciplinary literacy has shaped our view that oracy should be woven through the learning continuum, as it supports learning in all subjects. Encouraging higher levels of quality discourse, and its associated cognitive development, is not solely an issue for the subject of English.

Effective implementation of oracy education in the classroom would require additional professional development and support. The government should begin by reviewing and revising the content of the National Professional Qualification (NPQ) on Leading Literacy and the NPQ for SENCOs to ensure that they include sufficient training on how school staff can best support children’s speech, language and communication development.

The government should also implement free vision and hearing screening for all children in Reception, which is repeated when pupils transition to secondary school. This would prevent children from falling behind because they cannot see or hear well. The design and

implementation of this initiative would need to be considered carefully to ensure that it has the desired impact and is good value for money for the taxpayer.

Post-16

The government should also extend the pupil premium to provide additional support to 16 to 19-year-olds. Disadvantage does not stop at age 16, but the pupil premium does. Further education is often overlooked and underfunded. This extension would go some way towards remedying this inequity, as it would allow post-16 settings to provide pupils with targeted support to help them develop the oracy skills they need to secure employment.

Lastly, the post-16 GCSE resit policy should be reformed. It is not fit for purpose, as evidenced by the extremely poor pass rates (see Education Policy Institute, 2024). One option would be to design a new set of qualifications that assess core competencies, such as literacy and numeracy. Pupils would pass or fail. In a sense, the post-16 resit would not be dissimilar to a driving test. The current norm-referenced system – where pupils are graded against a bell curve – leads to a third of each annual cohort of pupils feeling like they are academic failures.



Conclusion

This report has outlined how the government can help every child find their voice. The evidence that we have presented demonstrates that an integrated pathway of speech, language and communication support from birth to 18 is key for children's educational, social, and emotional development. Our place-based working model highlights the importance of taking a context-driven approach to oracy education and celebrating linguistic diversity.

Over the next 12 months, the National Literacy Trust plans to work with partners from the public, private and voluntary sectors to inform the government's curriculum and assessment review. If you would like to take part in these discussions, please email us at policy@literacytrust.org.uk.



Annex

How we developed our definition of oracy

In order to develop a definition for oracy at the National Literacy Trust, we adapted Braun and Clark's (2022) six steps for thematic analysis framework. This approach is used widely in education, sociology, language and other social science research fields. It is often applied to qualitative primary data, but also offers a robust, adaptable framework for a systematic and thematic analysis of secondary data and evidence.

To begin the definition process, we first conducted an extensive search of relevant literature from third sector bodies, academic research and policy documentation from the four home nations. Aside from Wilkinson's (1965) original definition of the term 'oracy', all papers used in the analysis were published after 2017 in order to ensure that the definition produced is reflective of the modern world. Overall, the search returned 22 papers that explored definitions of oracy and its related concepts.

Next, we analysed each paper and summarised key findings relating to definitions and concepts of oracy. From each, we produced a series of initial codes (one or two-word terms) that reflected the key concepts discussed in the definition. Overall, we identified 108 different codes which we then used to generate initial themes. Based on the frequency and interrelationship of the initial themes, we developed and refined the theme titles. Our analysis suggested that, overall, there were nine key themes that underpinned the concept of 'oracy', including:

- Critical thinking
- Empowerment
- Citizenship
- Context
- Employability
- Self-expression
- Collaboration
- Diversity
- Wellbeing

Using these themes as a foundation, we collaborated with experts from across our organisation to reflect upon the meaning of the themes, our strategic priorities and what we believe oracy looks like in today's educational landscape. Finally, we used these findings and reflections as a foundation from which to write-up our definition of oracy.

Overall, we took an inductive approach to analysis which meant that identification of the key themes was driven by the evidence and data content, rather than our own expectations of what may underpin the definition or be present in the evidence base. We chose this method because we were exploring a highly complex, ever-evolving aspect of literacy. As such, we took a realist and essentialist approach to defining oracy at the National Literacy Trust, in order to produce a robust and evidence-informed definition that reflects the purpose and mission of our organisation.



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The logo for the National Literacy Trust, featuring the text "National Literacy Trust" in white, bold, sans-serif font, set against a dark blue, irregular, rounded shape.

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