

Bridging the Word Gap at Transition

The Oxford Language Report 2020



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Foreword



Jane Harley

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Moving from primary to secondary school is a major milestone in every child's life. While secondary school brings a wealth of new opportunities, pupils also need to grapple with the challenges of increased academic workload and exposure to up to four times as much new vocabulary as at primary school. For pupils with a 'word gap', or a vocabulary that is below age-related expectations, this poses significant problems. Unless these problems are addressed urgently, this word gap may undermine their enjoyment of school, their academic outcomes, their sense of wellbeing and their future employment prospects.

Much has been written about the importance of closing the word gap as children start primary school. However, there has been relatively little focus on the years of transition from primary to secondary school (10–11 year olds). Bridging the Word Gap at Transition: The Oxford Language Report 2020 aims to address this by exploring the changing demands on pupils' use and understanding of vocabulary as they progress through school and, in particular, navigate the primary–secondary transition. It highlights the negative impact of a widening word gap on their learning and future life chances. This is a critical time for a focus on vocabulary development, particularly in the context of Covid-19 and the much-publicised broadening of the attainment gap.

Oxford University Press (OUP) has a deeply rooted commitment to young people's language development. It drives positive change in educational outcomes through both its publishing and its research. At OUP, we closely monitor the language pupils read and write through the Oxford Children's Corpus, and we celebrate their creativity in the way they use vocabulary, create new words and express what they see in the world around them.

This new report builds significantly on the Oxford Language Report: Why Closing the Word Gap Matters (2018). In the course of a three-year programme of research, we have gathered over 3500 survey responses from teachers to gain a better understanding of the impact and trends of the word gap. We have also sought recommendations from schools and language experts as to what strategies, policies and activities can be employed to counteract its damaging effects. This research continued throughout the closure of schools and so reflects the growing concerns of teachers about the impact of lockdown. Over 70% of teachers believed that addressing pupils' vocabulary gap when they returned to the classroom would be a high priority in their school.

I would like to thank the Centre for Education and Youth (CEY) and all the expert voices – academics and practitioners – who have shared their research and insights to contribute to this report. The findings are stark.

Transition from primary to secondary is a pivotal time; the word gap remains a major issue, and more needs to be done to address this. There is a lack of coherence in the expectations for language coverage and how it is taught across primary and secondary schools. There is no better time than now to focus the debate, act with urgency and implement the recommendations outlined in this report.



Executive summary

Introduction

New research by Oxford University Press (OUP) and the Centre for Education and Youth (CfEY) shows that nearly three-quarters of teachers believe supporting pupils with vocabulary will be a 'high priority' in schools after the first national lockdown (as a result of Covid-19). Moreover, eight out of ten teachers agree that school closures during lockdown are likely to have widened the word gap at transition from primary to secondary school.

This report aims to answer two important questions:

1

What role does vocabulary play in pupils making a successful transition between primary and secondary school?

2

How can schools support pupils' vocabulary development during this transition?

The report draws on extensive research and three years of accumulated data, including over 3500 survey responses from a diverse range of UK teachers in a variety of job roles and subject areas across different phases of education. It also includes interviews with experts, as well as case studies and input from OUP's Educational Research Forum.

Further details of data sources can be found in Appendix 2.

What the research tells us

92% of teachers think school closures (due to Covid-19) have contributed to a widening of the word gap.

87% of teachers agree that increasing academic requirements at transition from primary to secondary school highlight pupils' difficulties with vocabulary.



Key findings

1

The effects of lockdown

Ninety-two percent of teachers think school closures (due to Covid-19) have contributed to a widening of the word gap. Ninety-four percent of teachers say that they found it challenging to support pupils' vocabulary development while teaching remotely. Three quarters also think that school closures during lockdown will contribute to an increase in the number of pupils with a vocabulary deficit.

2

Transition

Nine out of ten teachers think that the transition between primary and secondary school highlights vocabulary issues with the variety, quantity and purpose of language dramatically shifting.

3

Reading for pleasure

The majority of teachers surveyed are concerned that pupils may have read less widely for pleasure during lockdown and that reading for pleasure has a significant role in helping to reduce the word gap.

4

Pupils' self-esteem

Four out of five teachers believe that difficulties with vocabulary leads to a lowering of pupils' self-esteem, and an increased risk of poor behaviour and dropping out of education.

5

Academic vocabulary

Secondary school teachers are twice as likely as primary school teachers to say that pupils are not confident in using general academic vocabulary, including words such as 'summarise', 'compare' and 'analyse'.

6

Changing emphasis on the purpose and value of language

As pupils progress through the education system, the purpose and value attributed to language changes. At primary level, vocabulary is perceived by teachers as being most important for social communication and emotional expression/wellbeing. As pupils move into secondary school, teachers increasingly link the importance of good vocabulary to academic achievement and preparing for the world of work.

7

Changing priorities

Eight out of ten primary school teachers describe vocabulary as a high, strategic priority in their school; this drops to five out of ten teachers at secondary level.

8

Lack of time and staff resources

Two thirds of teachers say that a lack of time hampers efforts to improve pupils' vocabulary. More than half of teachers also flagged a lack of additional staff support, such as teaching assistants (TAs).

9

Whole-school vocabulary programmes

Secondary schools are more likely than primary schools to have defined whole-school vocabulary programmes, but only one in 20 secondary schools said their programme was "very effective".

10

Access to specialist support

Only one in four teachers has access to training or continual professional development (CPD) from external experts and language specialists. This is despite more than half of those teachers who did have access to external CPD rating this as "very helpful" for supporting their pupils' vocabulary development.

9 out of 10 teachers think that the transition between primary and secondary school highlights vocabulary issues.

Three quarters of teachers think school closures will contribute to an increase in the number of pupils with a vocabulary deficit.

Key recommendations

The research also highlights strategies that some practitioners are currently developing and employing to reduce the word gap, particularly during the transition between primary and secondary school.

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1

Academic vocabulary

Schools can increase the focus on general academic vocabulary as pupils prepare for and adapt to transition from primary to secondary school.

2

Code switching

Explicit teaching of different styles of language, such as formal and informal, can help pupils to identify appropriate registers and switch codes successfully, depending on the context, task and audience.

3

Supporting parents and carers

Schools can support parents and carers in providing enriched opportunities for vocabulary development at home by encouraging them to have regular sustained conversations with their children, by providing resources such as word lists with activities that can be shared and by promoting the benefits of independent reading.

4

Links between schools

Links between primary and secondary schools can be strengthened in order to increase curricula and improve pupils' vocabulary. Pupils also benefit from explicit conversations with teachers about changing vocabulary needs and support.

5

Vocabulary in the curriculum

Schools can plan vocabulary alongside the curriculum for all subjects, so that it builds up cumulatively through the years.

6

Teacher modelling

Teachers can model and promote rich, complex, specialist vocabulary and encourage word swaps in their dialogue with pupils, for example using the word 'discovered' rather than 'found'. Increasing pupils' awareness of synonyms helps them to understand the nuances and subtleties of vocabulary use in the English language.

7

Word lists and word webs

Teachers can share word lists with associated activities with pupils and parents/carers to support explicit vocabulary teaching. They can also encourage pupils to build up rich semantic word webs, securing their knowledge of words by visually mapping their meaning-based connections with other words and phrases.

8

Visual representation of words

Presenting a new word in a visually engaging way, such as simply writing or displaying it in front of the class, can help pupils to secure and retain their knowledge of that word.

The report also recommends ways in which the Department for Education and non-governmental organisations can support teachers in the drive to secure good vocabulary for all pupils, particularly during transition:

- Provide more training and support in teaching vocabulary, so teachers are not reliant on *ad hoc* forms of support and can access a variety of suitable resources speedily and efficiently.
- Signpost and share word lists with accompanying activities and other vocabulary-focused resources, highlighting how these relate to different stages and subject areas.



Vocabulary expectations at primary and secondary school

The research shows that as pupils move between primary and secondary school there is a change in the quantity and type of vocabulary that they encounter. Unfortunately, pupils are not always given the support they need to navigate this change.

Quantity of vocabulary

Professor Alice Deignan, from the University of Leeds, is the principal investigator in a study of language during the transition from primary to secondary school. Professor Deignan's hypothesis is that some of the drop off in achievement that occurs at Key Stage 3 (ages 11–14) can be attributed to a lack of vocabulary.



Alice Deignan, Professor of Applied Linguistics, School of Education, University of Leeds

Once pupils arrive in Year 7, the amount of new language they're exposed to increases dramatically.

In our research, we had expected an increase in the quality and variety of language that pupils encountered at secondary school, but we weren't expecting such a large change in the quantity. In an average day at secondary school, pupils are exposed to three or four times as much language as at primary school, purely in terms of quantity.

With such a massive increase in the quantity of language, the number of unknown words fired at pupils during a lesson increases similarly. These reach a level where pupils cannot use normal strategies to work out their meaning, such as using overall context. Pupils are being pushed far out of their comfort zone academically.

Types of vocabulary

Vocabulary can be categorised into three tiers (see below), but it is the deficit of Tier 2 vocabulary that becomes most apparent during transition from primary to secondary school.

Types of vocabulary

The book *Bringing Words to Life*, Beck et al. classifies types of vocabulary into three tiers:

- **Tier 1** vocabulary includes words that are generically useful in a variety of everyday situations, such as 'cat', 'read' or 'good'.
- **Tier 2** vocabulary includes words that are more academic in nature, but non-subject-specific, such as 'compare', 'analyse' or 'conclusion'.
- **Tier 3** vocabulary is subject-specific, for example 'iamb', 'allegro' or 'titration'.



Dr Jessie Ricketts from Royal Holloway, University of London, explains the importance of Tier 2 vocabulary:

Tier 1 vocabulary consists of the words that everyone knows. These are the words that nursery and reception teachers really focus on. Tier 2 vocabulary operates across different contexts and these words are harder to teach. Best practice suggests that if we're going to teach words at school to pupils, then it's Tier 2 words that we need to teach, because they are the words that are really going to help pupils operate across different topics.



Photo Credit: Russell Sach

Dr Jessie Ricketts, Reader,
Department of Psychology, Royal
Holloway, University of London

However, secondary school teachers are twice as likely as primary school teachers to say that pupils are "not at all confident" in using Tier 2, general academic vocabulary.

Recognition of the importance of teaching Tier 2 words is not widespread. Geoff Barton, former head teacher and now General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), argues that teachers have a "wider responsibility [to teach vocabulary] that goes beyond their own subject".

Professor Deignan explains how the Tier 2 language deficit can go undetected:

When pupils transition to secondary school, they are taught by subject-specific teachers. For pupils, having the academic vocabulary to access that curriculum is critical. We've seen many cases of intelligent pupils who simply don't have that vocabulary.

It's often not the technical terms that are lacking. In a sense, the technical terms are less of a challenge because the teachers know that they're difficult. For example, 'photosynthesis' is a technical term, so teachers know it is problematic and will explicitly teach it. However, it's the general academic [Tier 2] vocabulary that extends across many subjects, which is more problematic, for example words such as 'factor', 'influence' and 'cause'. These words aren't used in everyday language, particularly by 11- and 12-year-old pupils, and they are not subject specific.

For teachers and other educated professionals, this academic vocabulary is the language that we use all the time, without consciously thinking about it. It is permanently in the background of our communications while we foreground the specialist content, which makes it quite difficult for us to recognise and teach it.

In many secondary schools, pupils have five intensive one-hour lessons per day whereas a primary school curriculum is often more thematically based so the teacher has time to go over things more, repeating the language and concepts. In secondary schools, it is quite likely that this lack of academic language is going under the radar for teachers. If you think of a secondary teacher who is seeing maybe 120 or 150 pupils a week, and is under great pressure to get through a lot of subject-specific material with them, they don't have time to analyse the vocabulary that pupils are using or not using and they maybe don't have the linguistic skills either.



Geoff Barton, General Secretary
of the Association of School and
College Leaders

Professor Deignan sees scope for doing more in the summer term of Year 6 (ages 10–11) to strengthen pupils' vocabulary in preparation for the transition. She also believes that an enhanced focus on vocabulary in Year 7 (ages 11–12) could help pupils to bridge the word gap, in particular using corpus-based resources that draw on data relating to the analysis of a broad spectrum of texts appropriate for that level.

One secondary school that has introduced a range of activities to support pupils' vocabulary at Key Stage 3 (ages 11–14) is Greenshaw High School in Sutton.

Case study:

Greenshaw High School, Sutton

Phil Stock, Deputy Headteacher

Greenshaw High School is a large secondary school with almost 2000 pupils.

Pupils in Key Stage 3 (ages 11–14) are given a 'Big Words' booklet at the start of the year. These booklets set out ten words that pupils are expected to learn each week. Pupils answer questions about the words and their characteristics, and are set short tasks, for example using the words in full sentences.

The words are often directly relevant to the knowledge pupils are developing at that point in the year, but not always. Phil Stock, the Deputy Head, explained that as well as improving pupils' vocabulary, the 'Big Words' booklets are designed to signal to pupils joining the school, and to their families, that "we take vocabulary seriously".

In future, the school would like to introduce more graduated activities so that all pupils can confidently access the work, whatever their attainment level.

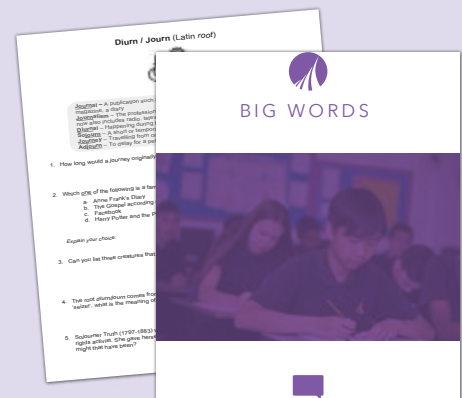
Sometimes pupils have pushed back on the relevance of the words in the lists, something the school thinks could be mitigated by mapping words more directly to the curriculum content. Despite this, pupils said the 'Big Words' homework helped them learn new words quickly and enjoyably, whilst drawing connections between them. One Greenshaw pupil commented:

"You're able to connect a lot of words and then you'll find that they all have similar meanings if they all have the same prefix or suffix."

Parents and carers of pupils at Greenshaw school are also positive about the booklets:

"He [my son] really soaks in not only the words and the way the words are being used, but the enthusiasm for it, which I think is also very important."

During lockdown, the staff at Greenshaw High School took the opportunity to review how they anticipate, introduce and use vocabulary in their teaching. For example, they looked at how they use etymology and phonology to support pupils' understanding of words and their different parts. The Deputy Headteacher believes there is more work to be done "to make this an automated aspect of pedagogical practice, but at least it's been a good start".

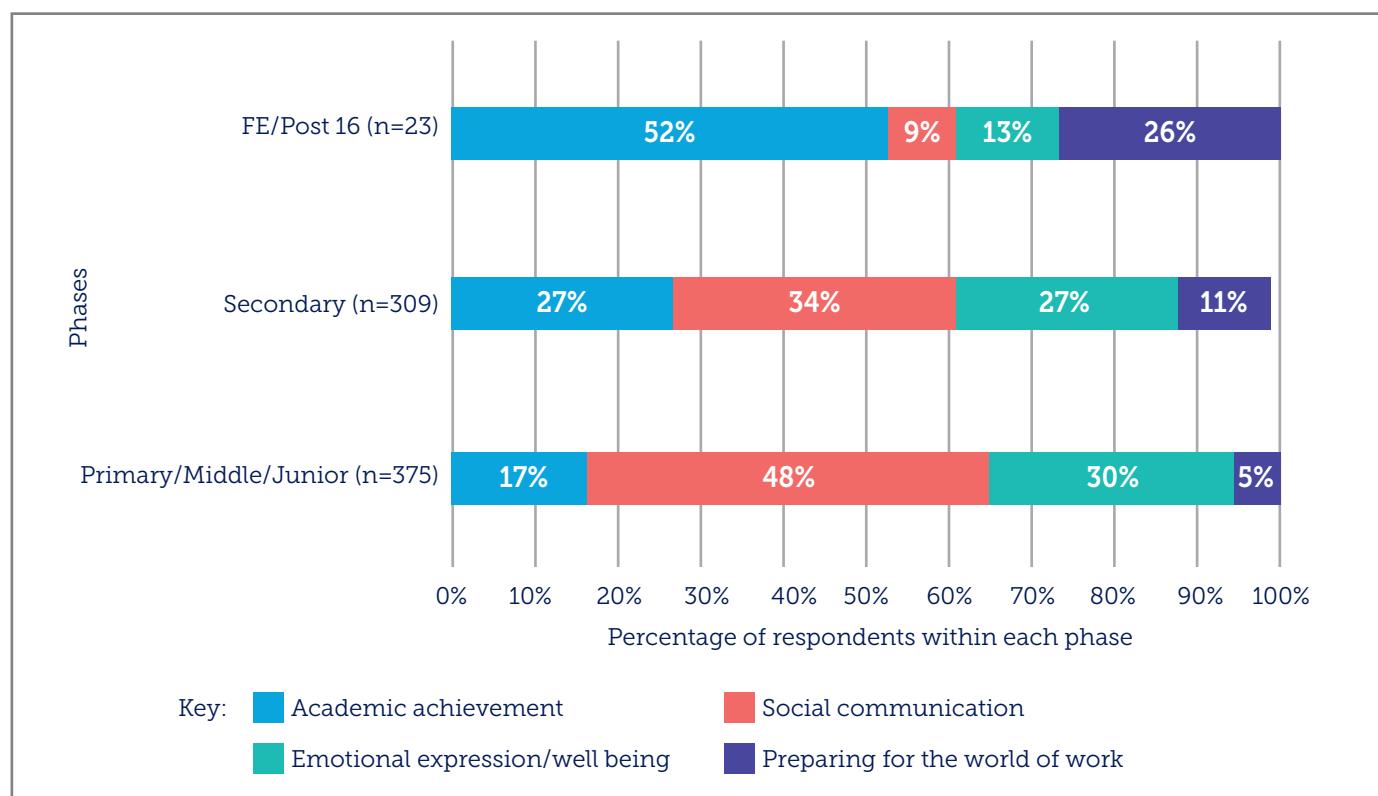


The changing purpose and value of language

Our research reveals how the perceived purpose and value of language changes as pupils move up through the education system. The point at which this change of perception is most evident is during the transition between primary and secondary school.

At primary level, vocabulary is perceived by teachers as being most important for social communication and emotional expression/wellbeing. As pupils move into secondary school and on to post-16 education, teachers increasingly link the importance of good vocabulary to academic achievement and preparing for the world of work.

Responses to the question: In your opinion, what is a good vocabulary most important for? from OUP's Closing the Word Gap Survey



The value of language

As well as a shift in the perceived purpose of language, there is also a change in the way that pupils acquire and value language, including vocabulary. This change is particularly marked during and after transition to secondary school.

Professor Maggie Snowling from the University of Oxford points out that “in adolescence, the peer group becomes the main model for the use of language and an agent of vocabulary acquisition”. She explains that the process of pupils acquiring vocabulary from their peers can throw up difficulties due to the need to code switch between using the language of a peer group and the language of schools and employers. This can disproportionately disadvantage pupils whose peer group and family have language that is furthest from the forms expected within the labour market and formal education establishments.

Malcolm Richards, Director of The Culture Yard CIC Ltd and educator, observes that many pupils are remarkably adept at code switching.



Maggie Snowling, Professor of Psychology, Department of Experimental Psychology, University of Oxford and President, St. John's College

“When I was working in an urban secondary school in London and working with multi-ethnic, multi-lingual students, it was always really interesting to see the tensions between the language that they were using in their ordinary discourse and the language of instruction, which is the formal English used in lessons. Many young people use this technique of code switching in order to engage with curriculum resources and to adhere to the rules and regulations of the school site.

If you've got the language of instruction, then you have an advantage. If you don't have that language of instruction, then you are always going to be at a disadvantage in terms of the assessments and outcomes that generally education measures. Code switching is one of the ways in which students seek to navigate the system, while at the same time being able to communicate and speak with their authentic voices in other spaces and places.”



Malcolm Richards, Director of The Culture Yard CIC Ltd, and educator

This awareness of different codes need not diminish the value of other forms of language, particularly language used in peer groups and local communities. Indeed, these non-standard forms of English should be valued in their own right and certainly not regarded as inferior.

Zahra Bei draws on her own experience as a teacher to emphasise the benefits of using a variety of media in the classroom, including those that are representative of pupils' own communities, to show the value of a range of different language codes and vocabulary. Working with media, such as films that pupils can relate to, sparks enthusiasm to discuss issues that affect their lives.

Zahra Bei also argues that using texts that reflect pupils' lives is a way of avoiding the resistance that she believes arises when pupils encounter texts that do not represent them.

“I'd bring books in and these pupils would say, 'I'm not reading a book', but by the time we discussed the author's life, they'd go 'Oh, I can relate to that' or 'That's someone that looks like me' – particularly with someone like Benjamin Zephaniah, who was excluded at the age of 13...

For children to access language, sometimes they have to see themselves in it, and they have to see themselves in those who speak the language, write the words and tell the stories. Otherwise words devoid of context are very difficult to claim.”

Zahra Bei, founder of No More Exclusions, and teacher at a pupil referral unit

Geoff Barton, General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), points out that being able to navigate different forms of language doesn't mean that you "won't have your own, home-grown vocabulary". However, he believes it is important for schools to help pupils acquire vocabulary and move between forms of language that allow them to access different areas of society.



Geoff Barton, General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders

We all want to give young people access to a variety of possible careers and working environments, and vocabulary plays a part in that. If you're going to be successful working in areas of life that are deemed to be powerful, such as the law, media and politics, then having access to certain vocabulary is going to be very important. You can still have dialect and colloquial words, but if you only have your home-grown dialect words, whilst you may be very successful in your community, it will be much more difficult for you to be successful in wider professional worlds...

In some contexts, there is great value placed on being able to deploy the terms 'I know' and 'I consider' in nuanced and accurate ways. Latinate vocabulary, which tends to include longer and more sophisticated-sounding words, can act as a proxy for being able to operate with confidence in certain work environments. You can be limited if you don't have that vocabulary at your disposal. Pupils therefore need to develop the full range of vocabulary and that means being able to move with ease between informal, colloquial language and more formal, Latinate language.



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Engaging with parents and carers

OUP's research shows that teachers understand the valuable role played by parents and carers in relation to their children's language and vocabulary. Nine out of ten teachers surveyed believe that parents and carers are "very important" in the development of their child's vocabulary. The most important question for schools is how they can engage effectively with parents and carers to help them to develop their children's language skills.

Parental involvement

The role of parents and carers at primary level tends to be very different from their role at secondary level, with transition often marking a step back in parental engagement. However, recent evidence from The University of Exeter and CfEY suggests that lockdown precipitated a striking increase in parents' sense of responsibility for their child's education despite the challenges this brought for them (see Appendix 1).

At primary level, there tends to be a substantial level of direct engagement with parents and carers through shared reading for homework, invitations into school for events such as assemblies and general regular communication through newsletters, email and social media.

The case studies below highlight ways in which two primary schools engage with parents and carers with the specific aim of supporting pupils' vocabulary development. The first case study looks in particular at teaching under lockdown.

Case study:

New Marston Primary School, Oxford

Rachel Vlachonikolis, Acting Headteacher

During lockdown, teachers taught online lessons, which parents and carers were able to join too. As part of these lessons, teachers discretely taught the key vocabulary needed for stories.

Word selections, explanations and activities to understand these words were important elements of lessons across subjects. The school continued with information sent termly to parents and carers, which included a knowledge organiser. This explains the key vocabulary that pupils need to support their learning.

Online modelling of story-reading was well received by parents and carers. In the demonstrations, teachers often paused and 'thought aloud' about the words in the text. Parents and carers commented on how useful it was to see this technique demonstrated, and they were able to use it themselves when reading with their children.



Case study:

Broken Cross Primary Academy and Nursery, Macclesfield

Lauren Frame, Year 2 Teacher

Parents and carers at Broken Cross Primary Academy say they feel comfortable at the school, noting that all levels of staff are exceptionally open to conversations with family members. Alongside in-person conversations, the school uses newsletters, which contain 'one-minute guides' explaining important topics such as 'How to talk to your child about a book'.



One homework task per half term is based around talk to begin a new topic or to prepare pupils for a written activity. For example, in one case, pupils were asked to speak to their families about their favourite games and toys, with children and parents/carers sharing ideas. This served as a hook for a new history topic on games and toys, but also highlighted the vocabulary that children would need during subsequent lessons.



Broken Cross also hosts poetry and story recitals for parents and carers. These are more intimate than assemblies as pupils perform their work just to their families. This gives more time for families to respond. These recitals provide the opportunity for pupils to perform their newly acquired vocabulary in context, helping them remember it for longer, as well as boosting their confidence in presenting.

Supporting vocabulary development at home

Dr Jessie Ricketts of Royal Holloway, University of London, has a particular interest in vocabulary and reading across the primary–secondary transition. She points out that by the time pupils enter secondary school, their vocabulary levels vary enormously.

Our research has shown that in secondary school vocabulary knowledge is extremely variable. At the top end of the spectrum, there are young adolescents who have adult levels of vocabulary knowledge. However, at the other end of the spectrum there are pupils who have the vocabulary knowledge of an average pupil aged six to nine. These pupils have gaps in their everyday language, which will hamper their understanding in class and they will struggle to access the secondary curriculum.

Dr Ricketts emphasises pupils' need for exposure to high-quality spoken and written language. She acknowledges the role that parents and carers can play in supporting their children's vocabulary development.

The standard advice is to encourage parents to talk to their children. But they shouldn't just talk at them; they should also be encouraged to listen to their children and engage with them. Reading to them is valuable too, because in order to gain broad and nuanced knowledge of vocabulary, exposure to books is really important. Books introduce young people to quite different kinds of language in terms of the vocabulary items, the frequency of those items and the way that vocabulary items are used.

Teachers and academics agree that encouraging reading and conversation at home is the lynchpin of parental support for vocabulary, but more than half of the teachers surveyed by OUP believe fewer pupils spent time reading widely or for pleasure during lockdown than they would normally. On the other hand, findings from the National Literacy Trust's annual survey provide more encouraging findings, with children reporting that they in fact read more during lockdown – and enjoyed doing so (see Appendix 1).

Geoff Barton points out the need to be sensitive about asking parents and carers to encourage their children to read more at home. He warns against any implication that “if you’ve got three or fewer books at home, then you’re a bad parent”. Instead, he encourages schools to take a positive and non-patronising approach to supporting parents and carers to provide their children with enriched opportunities for vocabulary development, for example by emphasising the value of conversation at mealtimes or setting homework that involves children talking to adult members of their family.

You can remind parents that reading still matters, even if their children are teenagers, by promoting offers such as £1 off and going into a bookshop with them and choosing a book. This reinforces the message that it is parents' responsibility to support their children's reading, and that it can make a difference.

Schools are promoting partnerships with parents in all kinds of different ways. Some give parents bits of vocabulary they can practise with their children as part of their homework. Other schools set homework which involves pupils interviewing their parent or grandparent or another adult, then reporting back on their findings. This builds up the notion of conversation in the home and helps to remind parents that there are many ways that they can contribute to their children's language development.

9 out of 10 teachers surveyed believe that parents and carers are “very important” in the development of their child's vocabulary.

Teachers and academics agree that encouraging reading and conversation at home is the lynchpin of parental support for vocabulary



How to provide effective support for vocabulary at transition

OUP's research highlighted some other areas, in particular around expectations and teaching, to help ensure a more effective transition between Key Stage 2 (ages 7–11) and Key Stage 3 (ages 11–14) in relation to vocabulary.

Teacher training on language acquisition

Dr Jessie Ricketts investigated the challenges faced by secondary teachers when trying to support pupils with poor vocabulary knowledge.

“Secondary teachers tell me that although they are supporting lots of pupils with poor vocabulary and poor reading skills, they themselves don't really have the knowledge or the resources they need to help these pupils. I looked into this further and realised that many secondary teachers don't get much training about how children learn about language and how they acquire literacy skills.

Early Years and Key Stage 1 teachers are more likely to say that they have had sufficient training about language acquisition and are confident in understanding the building blocks of language and literacy. Key Stage 2 teachers often feel similarly to secondary teachers about their lack of knowledge in this field.

Unfortunately, I have found secondary SENCOs, LSAs and TAs using materials that were designed for four-year-olds to try and help fifteen-year-olds to read words. Obviously, these efforts were of limited success, but these were the only resources the teachers had to tackle this level of language deficit. Luckily, I think the tide is changing and more age-appropriate materials are becoming available.*”

OUP's research revealed that fewer than a quarter of all teachers had access to training or continual professional development (CPD) from external sources in order to help develop their pupils' vocabulary. Of the teachers who did have this training, however, more than half said they found it “very helpful”.

Time, staffing and resources

Teachers identified three other main barriers to providing better support for pupils' vocabulary development:

- 1 Two-thirds of teachers said a lack of time is the main challenge.
- 2 More than half of the teachers said they lacked additional staff support, such as teaching assistants (TAs), and resources for one-to-one support.
- 3 Resources such as vocabulary lists, quizzes, card sorts and online interactive activities were flagged as some of the tools that teachers would value in order to better support vocabulary teaching.

*SENCOs, LSAs and TAs: special educational needs coordinators, learning support assistants and teaching assistants

Closer links between primary and secondary schools

Catherine Boulton, formerly of the National Literacy Trust, argues that primary and secondary school links need to be strengthened in order to increase continuity of curricula. Where links already exist, pupils may benefit from teachers having explicit conversations about vocabulary needs and support. This is particularly important for the transition pupils starting secondary school in September 2020. Three quarters of teachers in OUP's 2020 survey feel that the new Year 7 pupils (ages 11–12) are more likely to struggle with subject-specific and general academic vocabulary due to disruption to their time in Year 6 (ages 10–11) in summer 2020.

Greenshaw High School in Sutton employs a variety of strategies to strengthen links with feeder primaries, in order to make the transition to secondary school smoother and more effective.



*Catherine Boulton, formerly
Head of Teacher Development,
National Literacy Trust*

Case study:

Greenshaw High School, Sutton

Jane Wilson, Head of Transition

Jane Wilson, the Head of Transition at Greenshaw High School visits feeder primaries to speak to incoming Year 6 pupils (ages 10–11) about secondary school. Greenshaw hosts several evenings a year for new parents and carers, and tracks attendance at these in order to identify those who may need additional encouragement and support to attend. These evenings do not have an explicit focus on vocabulary, but they help establish strong working relationships between the school and pupils' families as well as support for school priorities, such as vocabulary.



The Heads of Key Stage 3 (ages 11–14) English, maths and science go into the feeder primaries to learn what has been taught and how, in order to map this onto Greenshaw's Key Stage 3 curriculum. Jane explained that this is intended to reduce duplication in content and to help teachers to pitch their expectations appropriately. This ensures that Greenshaw "picks up where primary schools have left off".

When new pupils arrive at Greenshaw in Year 7 (ages 11–12), they sit reading tests which, alongside Key Stage 2 (ages 7–11) results, help identify how to target additional support in areas such as vocabulary.

Teachers' professional practice in relation to vocabulary is also a key priority. All staff have a professional learning goal linked to vocabulary. Having identified their focus, teachers then practise new approaches and share their reflections with other teachers. Staff have also received training from an external vocabulary expert on how to teach pupils new words, including how to introduce them, represent them graphically, provide swift and precise definitions, and revisit new words multiple times.



Birchwood Community High School in Warrington also works hard to strengthen links with feeder primaries but is aware of the challenges of organising liaison visits, given the high workload and pressure on the curriculum at many primary schools.

Case study:

Birchwood Community High School, Warrington

Jo Butler, Head of Year 7

Jo Butler, the Head of Year 7 (ages 11–12) at Birchwood Community High School is heavily involved in outreach work to support open communication. She visits primary schools and pupils' homes, helping to familiarise pupils with Birchwood and make it seem less daunting.



Jo also speaks to Year 6 (ages 10–11) teachers to familiarise herself with new pupils and she shares information with staff at Birchwood. However, high workload at the primary schools can make organising liaison visits difficult. Birchwood therefore also offers an extracurricular club for Year 6 pupils, hosted at Birchwood, so that new pupils can get a taste of their new school environment, as well as the breadth of subjects they will study.

Birchwood staff feel that pupils' vocabulary levels are highly variable upon entry to the school and that 'weaker' learners are at particular risk of having difficulties with vocabulary. There is also a concern that many pupils lack the life experiences to put new vocabulary in context. One teacher cited an example of working with a text about building sandcastles, which not all pupils were able to access because they had not built sandcastles themselves.



Vocabulary has therefore been a key focus for the English department for some time and is now being developed across the whole school. A key resource in this work has been the knowledge organiser. Pupils are provided with an overview of each topic being taught, including a vocabulary list. The knowledge organisers are then used to support teaching in a number of ways:

- Teachers are encouraged to incorporate new vocabulary into their speech and questioning.
- Each lesson begins with a starter activity, including an element of vocabulary revision.
- Homework also includes a vocabulary-focused activity.

The importance of seeing written word forms

The work of Isabel Beck, Linda Kucan and Margaret McKeown in *Bringing Words to Life* highlighted the important role of visual representation of words for pupils. This work was developed further in 'To See or Not to See: How Does Seeing Spellings Support Vocabulary' by Colenbrander *et al.*:

There is strong evidence that the presence of a word's written form leads to improved learning of its spelling and spoken form. There is also some evidence that it may lead to better learning of a word's meaning.

Dr Jessie Ricketts explored this area further and her results consistently show that seeing a word helps pupils to learn how it sounds. She acknowledges that many teachers frequently display or write a new word at the front of the class but points out that it isn't a universal practice. She recommends that this strategy be pursued consistently because it is easy to do, at no extra cost, and has been proved to be effective in helping secure new vocabulary in pupils' minds.

Developing semantic knowledge: modelling and word maps

Professor Maggie Snowling of the University of Oxford believes that, as a society, we should be concentrating our efforts on developing children's language much earlier than the primary–secondary school transition, but she concedes, "given that some pupils are arriving at secondary school with poor language skills, we should certainly be addressing that". However, she argues that this need not involve extensive costly resources. She believes that it is more important to consider the types of words that pupils need and how they are used, rather than just the number of words.

A pupil might know lots of words but not have an in-depth understanding of their semantic meaning. You can imagine a child of very low ability who has got an enormous vocabulary, because they have learnt loads of words, but they don't have a proper semantic representation of those words or understand the networks underlying the words.

Teachers can help to address this by feeding back to pupils and modelling better language than the pupils have used. For example, you can say, 'Yes, it's found, but maybe we could say it's discovered.' You can teach vocabulary through interaction. You can play games. You can ask someone to think 'What does the word mean? Can you think of it in another sentence? What does it make you think of? Can we imagine it? Can anybody in the group think of another word with the same or a similar meaning?'

With older pupils, you can use diagrams such as word maps. For example, you might have the word 'journalist' in the middle of a page. You might ask pupils, 'What are the attributes of a journalist?' They write their responses as a series of linked offshoots, for example: 'They work for newspapers'; 'They report news'; 'They write for a living'; 'Journalism is an occupation'. This helps a pupil to develop a full semantic representation of a word and all its nuances.



Conclusion

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Put starkly, our findings raise the prospect of a worsened word gap as a result of the Covid-19 lockdown. But, from this report, what appears critical for pupils as they transition from primary to secondary school is not only the *quantity* of vocabulary they have at their disposal but the *quality*. Do they have a deep knowledge of, and are they able accurately to use, those Tier 2 words and phrases they need to succeed? Can children as they move up into secondary school and begin their journey to GCSE exams, step up to the vocabulary requirements they need for all subjects?

So how can these key points be addressed? Greater consistency of curriculum and practice between primary and secondary schools is clearly important, as is a more gradual increase in the volume of academic vocabulary introduced during primary school. Reading for pleasure – both fiction and non-fiction – is also important as it has a positive effect on broadening vocabulary, understanding and engagement. Finally, fostering an effective partnership between school and home is critical. Further research is needed here to help identify the most effective ways that parents and carers can support their children's vocabulary development as they move up through primary and into secondary school.

Given the focus on academic vocabulary in this report, it is important to emphasise that such language is not only about achieving academic success. It is, as Geoff Barton says, the “language of power”; the language that will build young people's confidence, their ability to communicate effectively and ensure their voices are heard. If we are serious about social mobility, this is a word gap that must be addressed.

Vocabulary development is a core part of subject learning, so now more than ever, we all need to focus our efforts on ensuring all children have all the words they need to succeed.

In order to build an effective strategy for children's vocabulary development that pays particular attention to the transition from primary to secondary school, there are some important areas for us all to consider:

Primary schools

- 1 Is there more that school leaders can do to ensure children's academic vocabulary (Tier 2 and 3 words) is developed across the curriculum, not just as part of whole-school literacy? Should we encourage all primary schools to identify lessons as 'science' or 'history' or 'geography' and to highlight explicitly where academic words and phrases are used in these subjects?
- 2 Is there more guidance and support that can be offered to the non-specialist primary workforce, so that teachers know the language that will benefit their pupils most in secondary school?
- 3 Is the reading for pleasure strategy within a school focused too heavily on the quantity of words children read? Are there enough opportunities to explore and discuss new words encountered in reading and to build and consolidate word webs?

Secondary schools

- 1 What additional efforts can be made to understand vocabulary teaching and learning at primary schools in order to provide a more seamless transition when children start secondary school?
- 2 How can teachers ensure that vocabulary development remains a top priority?
- 3 Is there more that can be done to help connect home with school in relation to supporting children's vocabulary development?

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We are grateful to the following individuals for giving us their time and insight during the research for this report and for giving permission to quote some of their observations.

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- **Malcolm Richards**, Director of The Culture Yard CIC Ltd, and educator
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- With thanks to **Loic Menzies**, **Phil Yeeles**, **Will Millard** and **Sam Baars** from the Centre for Education and Youth



Appendix 1

References and recommended reading

Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction Isabel L. Beck, Linda Kucan and Margaret G. McKeown (2002)
'Children and young people's reading in 2020 before and during the COVID-19 lockdown', The National Literacy Trust (2020), <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/children-and-young-peoples-reading-in-2020-before-and-during-the-covid-19-lockdown/>

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'To See or Not to See: How Does Seeing Spellings Support Vocabulary Learning?' Danielle Colenbrander, Katharine Pace Miles and Jessie Ricketts (2019). Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools, Volume 50, Issue 4, pages 609–628 (published online 10 October 2019 https://pubs.asha.org/doi/abs/10.1044/2019_LSHSS-VOIA-18-0135)

'Using corpora to investigate the linguistic challenges of the transition from primary to secondary school', Duygu Candarli, Robbie Love and Alice Deignan (2019), presentation – https://robbielovelinguist.files.wordpress.com/2019/12/candarli-love-deignan_cl2019_final.pptx; video – <https://twitter.com/ucrelcrs/status/1088452141423910913>

Appendix 2

Summary of data sources used in this report

UK schools surveys

Survey	Complete responses
Closing the Word Gap Survey 2020 (July 2020)	493
Closing the Word Gap Survey 2019 (October 2019)	822
Vocabulary Needs in UK Primary Schools Survey 2019 (July 2019)	464
Vocabulary Needs in UK Secondary Schools Survey 2019 (July 2019)	492
Vocabulary Needs in UK Primary Schools Survey 2017 (December 2017)	474
Vocabulary Needs in UK Secondary Schools Survey 2017 (December 2017)	844
Total	3589

OUP's Educational Research Forum

- Five Teacher Polls on impact of Covid-19 (June 2020)
- Teacher Discussion Panel 1: Impact of School Closures and Remote Schooling on Students' Vocabulary (June 2020) c. 42 posts per topic
 - How are students and parents coping during the school closure period?
 - Are you aware of any particular resources that are being used during lockdown for vocabulary development?
 - Have you put in place any specific strategies or teaching to overcome this challenge?
 - Do you plan to address this challenge when students are back in the classroom and, if so, how?
 - What will we be returning to? (Additional teacher-generated thread with 25 posts)
- Teacher Discussion Panel 2: Addressing the Word Gap (July 2020) c. 60+ posts per topic
 - Impact on school curriculum/subject teaching
 - Introduction of new resources or initiatives
 - Resources to help address the word gap

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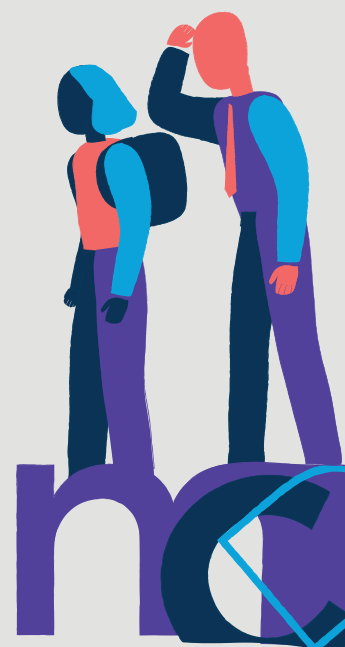
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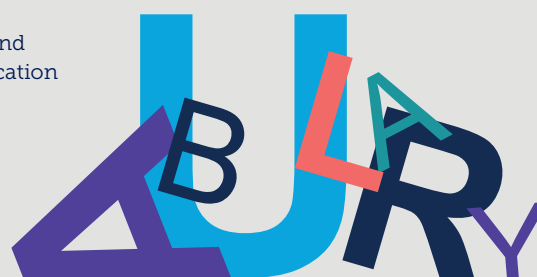
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A research collaboration between Loic Menzies, Phil Yeeles, Will Millard and Sam Baars from the Centre for Education and Youth, and the Oxford Education Language Group. Find more at <https://cfey.org>

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