



# LOST FOR WORDS



How children struggle to participate  
when they can't articulate



## Foreword

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Chair, the Oracy Commission for Oracy Education

These days, whenever we hear about teaching and the work that teachers do, the language far too often sounds technocratic and managerial. We hear words like ‘accountability’ and ‘targets’ and ‘performance’.

If we’d wanted all of that, we’d have become management consultants. I much prefer the insights of that ground-breaking media guru Neil Postman, who said: “Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see”.

Wow. That’s the purpose of education. For all of us in the teaching profession – by which I mean teachers and teaching assistants and education leaders – it’s quite a responsibility. We are doing nothing less than preparing our young people to take their place on this beautiful but fragile planet for a time when we may have left it.

We are creating for them a link to their future, and therefore hoping to instil in them the knowledge and skills and values and attributes that will help them to shape a challenging world. Which is where this report comes in. Because what we hope for in the future is fermented in the present.

And I know from my past year as chair of the independent Commission on Oracy in Education that the rich foundations of language – helping children to learn how to talk, to learn through talk and to develop their skills via active critical listening – have never mattered more.

The research underpinning this report makes that case. And the report itself sets out solutions. Plus, it brings us some important new insights into the significance of talk and listening in schools. We learn, for example, that 46% of primary teachers and 53% of secondary teachers agree that it’s easy to mistake speech and language issues for reading and maths problems.

Language, in all its forms, matters. And in an age when everyone is cross about everything, high quality talk and active listening have never mattered more. We don’t want children to be victims who are ‘lost for words’. We want to give them agency in their learning, a voice in their future. And, based on this report and its associated research, that’s what employers, parents and wider society wants too.

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## How children struggle to participate when they can't articulate

Several surveys and initiatives over the past few years have highlighted the link between language skills and literacy. Two years ago, a YouGov poll of teachers for the charity Speech and Language UK<sup>i</sup> estimated that 1 in 5 children were struggling with talking and understanding words.

Last year, the Oracy Education Commission<sup>ii</sup> pointed out that although this meant almost two million children in the country were not at the expected level for language and communication by the end of Reception, “there is no further monitoring data for their language as they progress through school”, and that “only half of primary teachers and a quarter of secondary teachers were confident in their understanding of the spoken language requirements in the National Curriculum.”

Two years on, we wanted to see if teachers thought speech and language problems were as widespread today, and if they were, what was causing them and when did they think they tended to become apparent. We also wanted to discover if there was a tendency to mistake communication issues for subject or behavioural problems, what teachers thought the effects of poor oracy had on literacy, and if they thought parents were aware of the link between the two.



We commissioned YouGov to survey over 1,000 teachers across the UK in both primary and secondary schools – and although opinions varied between the phases, there was broad agreement on most issues. In short:

- Half of teachers think up to 20% of their students have speech and language issues and a further third think up to 40% do
- Almost all think the problem has worsened in the past five years
- Teachers believe the decline in conversation at home, more time spent on social media and streaming videos, and less time spent reading outside of school are to blame
- Half say problems become apparent as soon as children start school
- Nearly half think it's easy to mistake speech and language issues for maths and literacy problems
- Three-quarters think that parents are often in denial about any issues their children may have
- A similar proportion believe that people, wrongly, assume that these issues mainly affect disadvantaged children
- Almost all teachers think parents do not understand the link between oracy and literacy or how the decline in children's communication skills has made teaching more difficult.

Even though there is a growing awareness of speech and language issues in schools, if not outside them, teachers still need a reliable, objective way of backing up their hunches – and if their suspicions are confirmed, to know what solutions are available. Elsewhere in this report, headteacher Genna Hitchen explains how she uses WellComm as part of her oracy and reading strategy, and literacy expert Martin Galway from the National Literacy Trust suggests how schools can arm teachers with the confidence to teach fundamental language skills.

# Main findings

## How big is the problem?

Most teachers in both primary and secondary schools think a significant proportion of their students have speech and language issues and that the problem is getting worse:

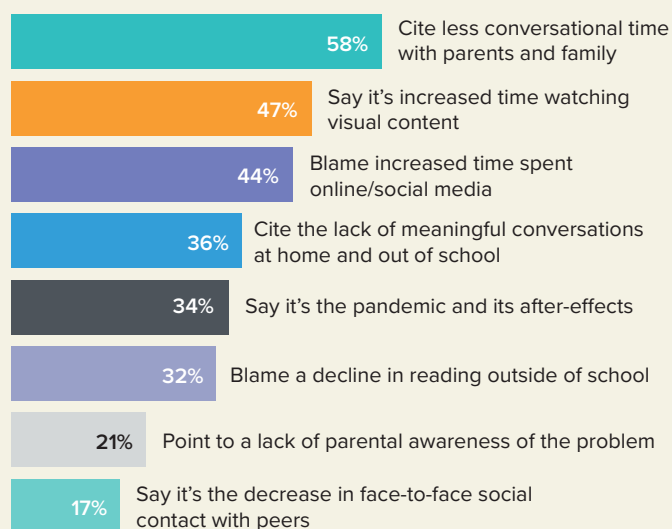
- 44% of primary teachers, and 53% of secondary teachers, think up to 20% of children in their school are below age-related expectations in speech and language
- Over a third of primary teachers – 37% – (and 29% of secondary teachers) think up to 40% are below age-related expectations
- The vast majority of teachers – 89% in primary and 78% in secondary – think speech and language skills have worsened since 2020.

**44% of primary teachers, and 53% of secondary teachers, think up to 20% of children in their school are below age-related expectations in speech and language.**

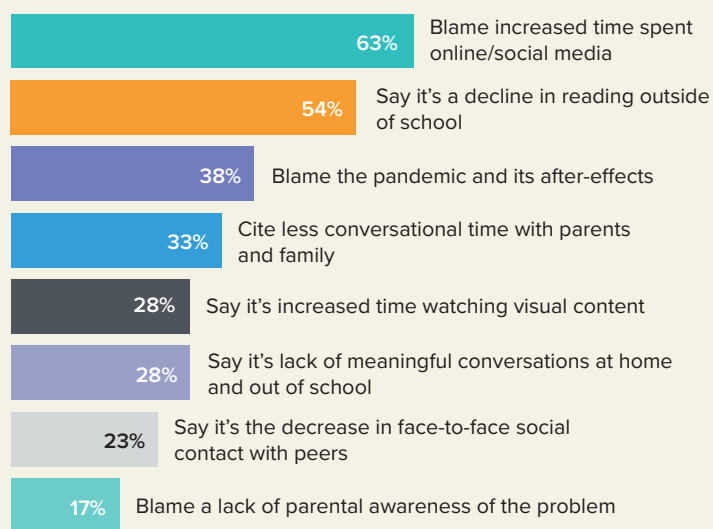
## Why do teachers think communication skills have deteriorated?

Although teachers in both phases agree that the ubiquity of online and visual content, pandemic after-effects and the decline in conversational time at home are to blame, opinions diverge about which factors have been most influential:

### Primary school teachers:



### Secondary school teachers:





## When do problems become apparent?

Most teachers agree that speech and language issues tend to become apparent before or just as children start school:

- 48% of primary school teachers and 30% of secondary teachers say issues become apparent as soon as children start school
- 33% of primary and 15% of secondary school teachers say before children start school
- 14% of primary and 13% of secondary school teachers believe it's in Years 1 and 2.

## How confident are teachers at correctly identifying speech and language issues?

Primary school teachers are more confident in their ability to spot any problems than secondary school teachers, but both groups think it's easy to mistake speech and language issues for reading and maths problems:

- 71% of primary teachers, compared with only 40% of secondary teachers, thought colleagues at their school were adept at spotting speech and language issues
- Over half of primary school teachers (53%) but only a third of secondary school teachers (33%) don't think they mistake behavioural issues for speech and language issues, though a quarter of the former (27%) rising to over a third of the latter (36%) do
- However, 46% of primary teachers – rising to 53% of secondary teachers – agree that it's easy to mistake speech and language issues for reading and maths problems, though 31% of the former and 17% of the latter disagree.

## How do teachers think parents and children tackle speech and language issues?

Most teachers in both phases agree that parents are often in denial about their children's communication problems, that they tend to assume erroneously that they only affect disadvantaged children and that they don't understand the link between oracy and literacy:

- Three-quarters of teachers (76% of primary and 73% of secondary school teachers) think parents are often in denial about their child's speech and language issues
- Similar proportions (72% of primary and 77% of secondary school teachers) think people assume that speech and language issues mainly affect disadvantaged children, whereas almost all teachers (94% of primary and 90% of secondary school teachers) think speech and language issues can affect any child
- And almost all (91% of primary and 89% of secondary school teachers) agree that parents do not appreciate that a decline in oracy has a knock-on effect on literacy.

**Three-quarters of teachers (76% of primary and 73% of secondary school teachers) think parents are often in denial about their child's speech and language issues.**



**Similar numbers (92% of primary and 85% of secondary school teachers) agree that the decline in speech and language skills has made teaching more difficult.**

## What do teachers think the challenges are for schools?

Teachers strongly believe that the public don't understand that the decline in children's speech and language skills has made teaching more difficult. And while they agree on the importance of oracy and the need for it to be taught, they are wary of it becoming an official target:

- Almost all teachers (93% of primary and 84% of secondary school teachers) think the public don't understand how much schools are struggling with speech and language issues
- Similar numbers (92% of primary and 85% of secondary school teachers) agree that the decline in speech and language skills has made teaching more difficult
- Half of teachers (49% of primary and 52% of secondary school teachers) say that too many of their colleagues think oracy is just talking without needing structured teaching, though 31% of the former and 23% of the latter disagree
- 8 in 10 teachers (79% of primary and 77% of secondary school teachers) believe that if oracy becomes a government target it will affect how much time is spent on other priorities
- 43% of primary and 52% of secondary school teachers agree that schools aren't fully aware of the rise of speaking and language challenges children are presenting with – though 39% of the former and 23% of the latter disagree.

# Conclusions

It's clear that most teachers in both primary and secondary schools think that a significant proportion of students have speech and language barriers, that the numbers have grown in the past five years and that a combination of declining conversational time at home, online and video distractions, the corresponding decrease in reading and the lingering after-effects of the pandemic are largely to blame.

While some teachers, mainly in primary schools, are confident that they can identify speech and language issues when they arise, many also admit that they are easily mistaken for behavioural or maths and literacy difficulties.

Moreover, teachers believe that parents are often in denial if their child presents with an issue and do not appreciate how schools are struggling with the decline in children's communication skills or how it can make teaching more difficult. And, while they agree on the importance of oracy, teachers worry about the knock-on effects on other priorities and teacher workload if it becomes an official target.

Finally, although increasing numbers of teachers are becoming more aware of speech, language and literacy problems in children, they often want an objective means of confirming their intuition. And this is where we can help. Our tools - such as WellComm, NGRT and PASS, covered in this report - offer early identification and a range of targeted, ready-made interventions that can be used immediately.

## Methodology

YouGov surveyed 1,021 teachers – 572 in primary schools, 414 in secondary schools, 35 in all-through schools – online during January and February 2025.

## Footnotes

- <sup>i</sup> Listening to Unheard Children, Speech and Language UK, 2023
- <sup>ii</sup> We Need to Talk, the Commission on the Future of Oracy Education in England, 2024

## How big is the problem?

44%

44% of primary teachers think up to 20% of children in their school are below age-related expectations in speech and language

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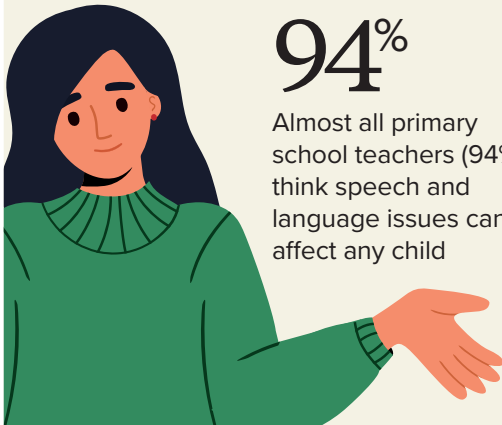
Over a third of primary teachers think up to 40% are below age-related expectations

89%

89% of primary teachers think speech and language skills have worsened since 2020



## Are parents in denial?



94%

Almost all primary school teachers (94%) think speech and language issues can affect any child

76%

76% of primary teachers think parents are often in denial about their child's speech and language issues

91%

91% of primary teachers agree that parents do not appreciate that a decline in oracy has a knock-on effect on literacy

## What are the challenges for schools?

92%

92% of primary teachers agree that the decline in speech and language skills has made teaching more difficult

46%

46% of primary teachers agree that it's easy to mistake speech and language issues for difficulties in reading and maths

43%

43% of primary teachers agree that schools aren't fully aware of the rise of speaking and language challenges children are presenting with

