

Bridging the word gap at transition

Introduction and background

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 transition from primary to secondary school (10–11 year olds). This report aims to address the gap by exploring the changing demands on pupils' use and understanding of vocabulary as they progress through school and 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.

The report aims to answer 2 key questions: What role does vocabulary play in pupils making a successful transition between primary and secondary school? How can schools support pupils' vocabulary development during this transition? The report draws on a wide range of data from the last 3 years including 6 key surveys which yielded 3,589 responses, 5 teacher polls and 2 teacher discussion panels.

Key findings

Vocabulary expectations at primary and secondary school

- As pupils move between primary and secondary school there is a change in the quantity and type of vocabulary that they encounter.
- Professor Alice Deignan, from the University of Leeds, has studied language during the transition from primary to secondary school and believes 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. She points out that in an average day at secondary school, pupils are exposed to 3 or 4 times as much language as at primary school in terms of quantity. There is a similar increase in the number of unknown words which pupils encounter during a lesson, pushing them academically out of their comfort zone.
- There are 3 tiers of vocabulary. Tier one comprises words which are generally useful in a generic context such as 'cat', 'read' or 'good'. Tier 2 vocabulary includes words that are more academic, but non-subject-specific, such as 'compare', 'analyse' or 'conclusion'. Tier 3 vocabulary is subject specific – for example, 'iamb' or 'titration'.
- It is the lack of Tier 2 vocabulary that becomes most apparent during the transition from primary to secondary school. Dr Jessie Ricketts from Royal Holloway, University of London, argues for more specific teaching of this tier, stating that: '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'.
- Secondary school teachers are twice as likely as primary school teachers to say that pupils are 'not at all confident' in using Tier 2 vocabulary.
- Professor Deignan points out that this lack of academic vocabulary is often not picked up by secondary teachers, either because of the large numbers of pupils they teach or because the teachers themselves may lack linguistic knowledge. She also highlights the fact that educated professionals use Tier 2 language unconsciously which makes it difficult for them to recognise and teach it.
- Professor Deignan believes that an enhanced focus on vocabulary in Year 7 (ages 11–12) could help pupils to bridge this word gap, in particular using corpus-based resources which draw on analysis of a broad spectrum of texts appropriate for that level. For example, in Greenshaw High School, pupils in Key Stage 3 are given a 'Big Words' booklet which sets out 10 words a week for pupils to learn. Pupils at the school said the 'Big Words' homework helped them learn new words quickly and enjoyably, whilst drawing connections between them.

The changing purpose and value of language

- 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. In OUP's Closing the word Gap survey, 17 per cent of primary teachers felt that good vocabulary was most important for academic achievement; at secondary level, the figure rose to 27 per cent.

- As pupils move to secondary school, there is a change in the way that they acquire language, including vocabulary.
- 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'. Pupils' acquisition of vocabulary from their peers can cause difficulties since they have to code switch between 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.
- However, this awareness of different codes need not diminish the value of other forms of language, particularly language used in peer groups and local communities. Such non-standard forms of English should be valued and not regarded as inferior.
- 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 an individual cannot have their own vocabulary. He points to the value which is 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 demonstrate an ability to operate with confidence in certain work environments.

Engaging with parents and carers

- Nine out of 10 teachers surveyed by OUP 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.
- Transition to secondary school often marks a decrease in parental involvement, although this situation changed in lockdown.
- Dr Jessie Ricketts of Royal Holloway, University of London points out that by the time pupils enter secondary school, their vocabulary levels vary enormously. Whereas some young adolescents have adult level vocabulary knowledge, others have the knowledge of a 6-9 year old. Dr Ricketts emphasises pupils' need for exposure to high-quality spoken and written language and acknowledges the role that parents and carers can play in supporting their children's vocabulary development.
- Although it is generally agreed that encouraging reading and conversation at home is the lynchpin of parental support for vocabulary, 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. However, findings from the National Literacy

Trust's annual survey indicated that children read more during lockdown.

- Geoff Barton encourages schools to take a positive and non-patronising approach to supporting parents and carers in providing enriched opportunities for vocabulary development through conversation at mealtimes or setting homework that involves children talking to adult members of their family. He gives examples of various ways in which schools are promoting partnerships with parents. These include giving parents vocabulary they can practise with their children as part of their homework or setting homework which involves interviewing an adult.

Providing effective support for vocabulary at transition

- OUP's research highlighted areas, around expectations and teaching, to ensure a more effective transition between Key Stage 2 (ages 7–11) and Key Stage 3 (ages 11–14) in relation to vocabulary. It revealed that fewer than a quarter of all teachers had access to training or continual professional development (CPD) from external sources to help develop their pupils' vocabulary. Of the teachers who did have this training, more than half said they found it 'very helpful'. Additional barriers which teachers faced were a lack of time, a lack of additional staff support such as TAs, and a lack of tools and activities to support vocabulary teaching.
- There is a need for closer links between primary and secondary schools. For example, when new pupils arrive at Greenshaw High School 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. Staff have also received training from an external vocabulary expert on how to teach pupils new words. The Heads of Key Stage 3 (ages 11–14) English, maths and science go into feeder primaries to learn what has been taught and how, so that they can map this onto Greenshaw's Key Stage 3 curriculum. At Birchwood Community High School pupils are provided with a knowledge organiser which provides an overview of each topic being taught, including a vocabulary list.
- Several researchers have found that seeing a word helps pupils to learn how it sounds. The strategy of displaying or showing the word should therefore be pursued consistently.
- Modelling and word maps can help pupils to develop semantic knowledge. Teachers can address this by feeding back to pupils and modelling better language than the pupils have used. For example, they could say, 'Yes, it's found, but maybe we could say it's discovered.'
- With older pupils, diagrams such as word maps can be used. For example, a teacher might have the word 'journalist' in the middle of a page. Pupils can be asked, 'What are the attributes of a journalist?' can 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 pupils to develop a full semantic knowledge of a word.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://educationblog.oup.com/primary/bridging-the-word-gap-at-transition-the-oxford-language-report-2020>