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## Synthesis

# Oral language interventions<sup>i</sup>

Moderate impact for very low cost, based on extensive evidence

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Oral language interventions emphasise the importance of spoken language and verbal interaction in the classroom. They are based on the idea that comprehension and reading skills benefit from explicit discussion of either the content or processes of learning, or both. Oral language approaches include:

- targeted reading aloud and book discussion with young children;
- explicitly extending pupils' spoken vocabulary;
- the use of structured questioning to develop reading comprehension; and
- the use of purposeful, curriculum-focused, dialogue and interaction.

Oral language interventions aim to support learners' articulation of ideas and spoken expression. Oral language interventions therefore have some similarity to approaches based on Metacognition which make talk about learning explicit in classrooms, and to Collaborative learning approaches which promote pupils' talk and interaction in groups (such as Thinking Together).

## How effective is it?

Overall, studies of oral language interventions consistently show positive impact on learning, including on oral language skills and reading comprehension. On average, pupils who participate in oral language interventions make approximately five months' additional progress over the course of a year.

»»» Overall, studies of oral language interventions consistently show positive impact on learning

All pupils appear to benefit from oral language interventions, but some studies show slightly larger effects for younger children and pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (up to six months' additional progress).

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Some types of oral language interventions appear to be more effective than others, on average. Interventions which are directly related to text comprehension or problem-solving appear to have greater impact. There is also consistent evidence supporting reading to young children and encouraging them to answer questions and to talk about the story with a trained adult. A number of studies show the benefits of trained teaching assistants effectively supporting both oral language skills and reading outcomes.

In contrast, more general ‘whole language’ approaches, which focus on meaning and personal understanding, do not appear to be as successful as those involving more interactive and dialogic activities.

For all oral language interventions, certain factors are associated with higher learning gains, suggesting that careful implementation is important. For example, approaches which explicitly aim to develop spoken vocabulary work best when they are related to current content being studied in school, and when they involve active and meaningful use of any new vocabulary. Similarly, approaches that use technology are most effective when the technology is used as a medium to encourage collaborative work and interaction between pupils, rather than in a direct teaching or tutoring role. Most studies comment on the importance of training and teacher development or support with implementation.

## Latin American Evidence<sup>ii</sup>

This type of intervention and its effect on learning outcomes have been researched insufficiently in Latin America. Indirect references can be found in studies analysing the production of written texts and its relationship with reading comprehension, decoding, and oral comprehension skills, which provide some evidence that oral language interventions can contribute to improved outcomes. A more direct link can be found in studies that assess the learning process of English as a second language or collaborative learning strategies. However, this is more focused on the ability to speak English more fluently, than on the benefits that improving oral communication competence can have for the learning process.

Regarding interventions, it can be observed that those who used specific programs and / or projects, show improvements in students' oral communication, either because they improved the fluency and coherence of their speech, or they increased their reading comprehension and vocabulary.

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Interventions point out the relevance of the role of teachers who are in charge of oral expression activities, in which proper planning of teacher-student activities and dialogue is necessary in order to generate an environment of trust, and to give students the opportunity to express themselves freely.

In this sense, evidence produced in the field of comprehension and reading skills can be useful to understand the role that this type of strategy can have on learning outcomes. More research in the region is required to establish the effect of this type of intervention on students' academic performance.

## How secure is the evidence?

There is an extensive evidence base on the impact of oral language interventions, including a substantial number of meta-analyses and systematic reviews. The evidence is relatively consistent, suggesting that oral language interventions can be successful in a variety of environments. Although the majority of the evidence relates to younger children, there is also clear evidence that older learners, and particularly disadvantaged pupils, can benefit.

## What are the costs?

Overall, the costs are estimated as low. The direct costs associated with this strategy are limited to the use of additional resources, stories such as books for discussion, and professional development of teachers, which is likely to help improve learning outcomes.

## What should I consider?

Before you implement this strategy in your learning environment, consider the following:

1. How can you help pupils to make their learning explicit through verbal expression?
2. How will you match the oral language activities to learners' current stage of development, so that it extends their learning and connects with the curriculum?
3. What training should the adults involved receive to ensure they model and develop pupils' oral language skills?

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4. If you are using technology, how will you ensure that pupils talk about their learning and interact with each other effectively?

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