RLC Research Review:
Oral Language Interventions

Context – Looked After Children:

According to c. 41 of the Children Act 1989, Looked After Children (LAC) are children that have been in the care of a local authority and provided with accommodations for a continuous period of more than 24 hours. A child up is eligible for the LAC designation until they turn 18, return home, or are adopted (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children [NSPCC], 2021). The education of LAC in England is supported through key legislation and policy:

- The Children and Young Persons Act 2008, which amends aspects of the Children Act 1989 and reforms the care system of LAC,
- The Children and Families Act 2014, which specifies that local authorities must appoint at least one person to support the educational achievement of LAC, and
- Statutory guidance from the DfE (2021a), such as how to promote the emotional and behavioural development of LAC.

As of 31 March 2020, there were 80,080 LAC in England, representing nearly 1 in every 100 pupils attending school (DfE, 2021). While already a striking number, it has been growing year over year since 2008, increasing by over 15% since 2015. The majority of these children are placed in the care of their local authority due to abuse or neglect (63%), while the remaining are placed into care due to family dysfunction (14%), family in acute distress (8%), absent parenting (7%), child's disability (3%), parent's illness (3%), or other issues (2%) (DfE, 2021).

About 10% of LAC move between three or more placements each year, putting them at significant risk regarding their well-being and positive behavioural outcomes. Moreover, a large and growing body of evidence suggests that LAC may suffer from established behaviour patterns developed throughout early childhood that negatively impact their ability to thrive in typical educational settings without specific attention to their social-emotional and academic development. At the same time, LAC are far from a homogenous group of children. They vary by age (ranging from under 1 year up to 18 years), ethnicity, gender, reasons for being looked after, placements (e.g., foster placement, living independently), legal status (e.g., care order, voluntary agreement), locality of placement, and support needs.

The DfE's (2021) most recent data from 2019 on outcomes for LAC finds the following:

- four times more likely to have a special educational need;
- nine times more likely to have an education, health, and care plan;
- lower educational attainment non-looked after children at
  - key stage 1 in reading, writing, and mathematics, and science (26 percent fewer reached the expected standard);
  - key stage 2 in reading, writing, and mathematics (28 percent fewer reached the expected standard), though this outcome appears closely related to the prevalence of pupils with a special education need;
  - key stage 4 in the average Attainment 8 score (44.6 versus 19.1), percentage of pupils achieving grade 5 or above in English and mathematics (40.1 versus 7.2), and English baccalaureate average point score (3.87 versus 1.52).

In general, LAC are more likely than non-looked after children to have mental health issues, additional or special education needs, and lower educational attainment. Finally, after leaving care, they are also less likely to be in education, training, or employment (NSPCC, 2021). See the sources below for more in-depth examinations of the complex and multi-faceted circumstances and outcomes LAC face.

Department for Education. (2021). *Statistics: Looked-after children*.
   https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-looked-after-children
National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. (2021, August 6). *Statistics: Looked-after children*.
   https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-looked-after-children

Oakley, M., Miscampbell, G., & Gregorian, R. (2018). *Looked-after children: The silent crisis*. Social Market Foundation.

Sebba, J., Berridge, D., Luke, N., Fletcher, J., Bell, K., Strand, S., Thomas, S., Sinclair, I., & O'Higgins, A. (2015). *The educational progress of looked after children in England: Linking care and educational data*. Rees Centre, University of Bristol.

Title:

Key texts:

Education Endowment Foundations' literacy guidance reports –
https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports

Jay, T., Willis, B., Thomas, P., Taylor, R., Moore, N., Burnett, C., Merchant, G., & Stevens, A. (2017). *Dialogic Teaching: Evaluation report and executive summary*. Education Endowment Foundation. https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/dialogic-teaching

Other reading:

Speechlanguage-resources: http://www.speechlanguage-resources.com/about-us.html

Walker, D., Sepulveda, S. J., Hoff, E., Rowe, M. L., Schwartz, I. S., Dale, P. S., Peterson, C. A., Diamond, K., Goldin-meadow, S., Levine, S. C., Wasik, B. H., Horm, D. M., & Bigelow, K. M. (2020). Language intervention research in early childhood care and education: A systematic survey of the literature. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 50*, 68–85. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2019.02.010

Method:

Education Endowment Foundation (EEF): The EEF Teaching and Learning Toolkit currently provides four guidance reports related to reading comprehension: *Improving Literacy in Key Stage 1*, *Improving Literacy in Secondary Schools*, *Preparing for Literacy*, and *Improving Literacy in Key Stage 2*. Each report draws on the best available research guidance related to teaching and learning literacy, including studies included in the EEF's Teaching and Learning Toolkit along with other studies and reviews. Additionally, the guidance reports further incorporate the expert perspectives of academics, practitioners, and other stakeholders.

Jay et al. (2017): In this EEF-commissioned report, the authors present the results from an evaluation of the "dialogic teaching" approach. As the report describes, "Year 5 teachers in 38 schools, and a teacher mentor from each school, received resources and training from the delivery team, and then implemented the intervention over the course of the autumn and spring terms in the 2015/2016 school year. Following the intervention, pupils were tested in English, mathematics, and science. This efficacy trial compared the 38 schools (2,492 pupils) in which the intervention took place with 38 control schools (2,466 pupils). During the intervention, the evaluation team also carried out a survey and interviews with a sample of teachers, mentors, and heads, plus case-study visits to three intervention schools" (p. 4).

The literature review below is further informed by (a) individual journals (all peer reviewed) primarily in the area of education, (b) relevant evaluation reports commissioned by the EEF, and (c) grey literature sources that evidenced a clear connection with the research literature and which contributed to current debates and understandings. Sources were selected to illustrate a range of aspects of the theory and a range of research methodologies from international contexts. All incorporated sources were published within the last ten years.

Overview of the Issue or Subject:

Oral language skills are foundational to literacy development as well as general educational attainment and labour market outcomes. However, vulnerable pupils, LAC included, are at particular risk of having fewer opportunities to develop their oral language skills. For instance, the commonly cited research by Betty Hart and Todd Risley, dating back to the 1990s, suggests that vulnerable children may be exposed to as many as 30 million fewer words by family members by age 3. More recently, studies have illustrated a positive relationship between childrens' neurological patterns and more frequent caregiver conversations.

Interventions to build oral language skills, which the EEF notes may also be called *oracy* or *speaking and listening* interventions, emphasize spoken language and verbal interactions. They include a range of efforts from different caregivers (teachers, parents, and others), can occur within and outside of schools, and focus on the content and/or processes of learning. Regardless of the specific intervention, the available research points to several factors, discussed below, that exert considerable influence on the outcomes observed.

Quality of Talk

First, when it comes to pupils' oral communication, the quality of talk is more important than the quantity. Schools and teachers are thus more likely to find a positive return on efforts that improve the structure and variety, rather than only the frequency, of opportunities for pupils to develop their oral language skills. To that end, the EEF's guidance report that focuses on improving literacy in secondary schools recommends the structure of "accountable talk", in which classroom discussions demonstrate accountability to:

- "Knowledge—for example, by seeking to be accurate and true;
- Reasoning—for example, by providing justifications for claims; and
- Community—for example, listening and showing respect to others" (p. 27).

In addition to providing a framework for teachers and pupils to draw on, accountable talk can also aid in identifying and addressing misconceptions (e.g., word comprehension), developing discipline-specific reasoning capacity (e.g., critiquing sources in English, discussing solution strategies in mathematics), and supporting pupils to see that their classroom contributions are valued.

Metacognition and Self-Talk

A second factor to consider is the extent to which interventions promote metacognition and self-talk. Metacognition is a concept introduced by John Flavell in the 1970s, and in the years since it has become a key predictor of educational attainment and surpasses intelligence in terms of accounting for observed variance in pupils' learning. Broadly, it refers to how pupils monitor and control their thought processes.

A key approach to building pupils' metacognitive capacity that regularly shows significant effect sizes is strategy instruction, which consists of "awareness raising (why do these strategies matter), modelling of the appropriate strategy, practise of the strategy and evaluation and goal setting" (EEF, *Metacognition and self-regulation: Evidence review*, 2020, p. 28). Various studies underscore that such instruction should target metacognitive strategies in tandem with cognitive strategies (i.e., how pupils approach knowledge acquisition and task completion). To this end, the research suggests that teachers should explicitly teach pupils the metacognitive regulation cycle, encompassing how to *plan*, *monitor*, and *evaluate* their learning. Moreover, the EEF Teaching and Learning Toolkit recommends that teachers respect the task- and subject-specific nature of the metacognitive regulation cycle. The Toolkit provides the following example: "after introducing a range of strategies that can be used to break down an as-yet unseen poem, English teachers might ask students to discuss, in pairs, the strategies they have previously used, plan which strategy they will use to tackle a new example, and review whether this strategy helped them tackle the poem" (EEF, *Improving literacy in secondary schools*, 2018, p. 28).

Related to metacognition is the approach of self-talk, encompassing *elaborative interrogation* and *self-explanation*. The former invites pupils to pay specific attention to their reasoning and understanding (e.g., what are the problems with a run-on sentence?), whereas the latter deals with pupils examining what they are studying (e.g., how does an understanding of my audience change the way I should communicate?). A growing evidence base suggests that both types of self-talk can positively impact attainment.

Whole-School and Classroom-Based Interventions

As outlined in the EEF's guidance reports, oral language interventions will tend to work at three levels: whole-school, whole-class, and targeted. The latter is beyond the scope of this research review but can be nonetheless critical for pupils who require more intensive support.

Whole-School Interventions

The effective, long-term promotion of pupils' language skills is thought to depend on the ability of schools and school system to provide support that spans classes and key stages. It is thus common to see the empirical literature mention parental and community engagement, 'promoting a shared vision' through whole school activities, and teacher training. At the same time, there is mixed evidence about the effectiveness of whole-school interventions, with the majority of studies focusing instead on classroom-based practices. Generally, however, research conducted over the last 10 years suggests that cultivating a language learning environment throughout a school (e.g., resources, learning spaces) can be boon to children's oral language skill development.

Classroom-Based Interventions

Interventions at the level of individual classrooms respect that supporting pupils' understanding of the form and function of language requires a combination of direct approaches (e.g., explicit instruction by the teacher) and the indirect approaches (i.e., creating a conducive learning environment that includes guided practice through dialogue and inquiry). In either case, the goal is for the children to learn the skills targeted by oral language techniques and thus become better communicators. The EEF outlines the following research-informed techniques that teachers can enact in their classroom.

- Teachers modelling what effective talk sounds like in their subjects, including using subject specific language and vocabulary, explicitly introducing the ways of reasoning that matter within their discipline, and the ways in which experts use metacognitive talk.

- Deliberately sequencing talk activities alongside reading and writing tasks to give pupils opportunities to practise using new vocabulary, develop ideas before writing, or discuss ways to overcome common challenges (e.g., "tell your partner what to do if they get stuck").

- Using sentence starters and prompts to help pupils structure and extend their responses. For example, starters such as "my claim is based on the fact that…" can help students link to evidence, while a shorthand like ABCQ (Agree, Build, Challenge, Question) sets out different ways to contribute to a discussion. Teachers can prompt students to extend their answers with questions (e.g., "Can you use 'moreover' to link to a second piece of evidence?").

- Selecting questions that are open-ended, well-suited to discussion and allow opportunity for authentic student response rather than direct replication of teaching: for example, where there are several plausible answers and where students' own views might develop.

- Setting goals and roles, particularly for small group discussions. By ensuring pupils have a clear goal—for example, a question to answer— it is more likely that talk will be focused and they will fully participate. It can also be beneficial to assign roles, such as summariser or questioner, though as students become more used to routines, it may not be necessary to make roles explicit. This type of approach can overlap with some reciprocal reading activities.

- Using wait time to develop pupils' responses, by leaving a pause after they have first given an answer, which gives them a chance to reframe, extend, or justify their reasoning.

- Giving precise feedback relating to different elements of accountability. For example, in addition to praising a pupil's use of evidence, teachers might praise the way in which pupils follow the norms of discussion, for example, by naming classmates or linking new contributions explicitly to previous points. Pupils can also be trained to provide peer feedback during talk activities, for example, related to the use of new vocabulary. (see EEF, *Improving Literacy in Secondary Schools,* 2018, p. 29)

The diagram below summarizes and extends many of the above techniques, serving as a useful guide for teachers for the kinds of interactions that tend to promote oral language skills.
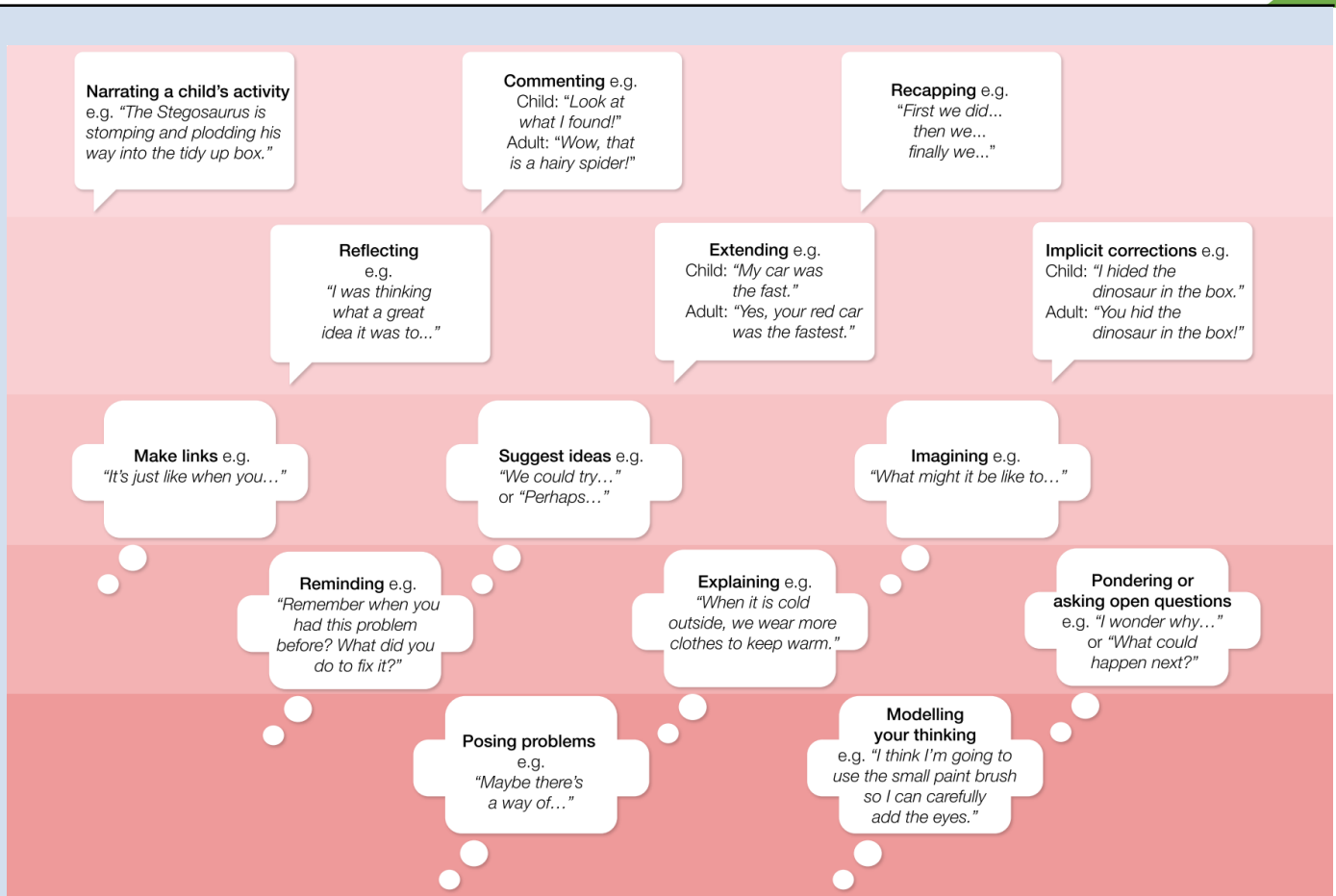
Source: EEF (*Improving Literacy in Key Stage 1*, 2020, p. 13)

Questioning

One of the strategies mentioned above that deserves further emphasis is the importance of questioning style. Most teachers use mainly closed-ended questions which encourage a shallow, surface level checking of understanding. However, research into children's oral language skill development underscores that greater use of open-ended questions can promote higher order patterns of thinking. Consequently, teachers need to give greater thinking time after asking questions, and greater time should be given for children to respond, in order for pupils to elaborate and explain their answers. In order to achieve this, a classroom climate conducive to dialogue must be created, where mistakes are welcomed and where teachers and their pupils are learning from one another.

In relation to teaching the purpose and use of an apostrophe for example, the EEF's guidance report suggests that rather than pose broad questions such as "When should an apostrophe be used?", which does little to elicit misconceptions and learning gaps, teachers could present a variety of phrases (e.g., "hes very happy") and ask pupils where apostrophes should be added. One recent project funded by the EEF called Embedding Formative Assessment has examined the use of more effective questioning (among other formative assessment strategies) among 140 secondary schools. On average pupils made the equivalent of two additional months of progress in their Attainment 8 GCSE score, and follow up studies have found these benefits may be greatest for children in lower prior attainment groups

Feedback

Related to questioning, effective feedback has been shown to have one of the largest effect sizes on student achievement. Evidence compiled by the EEF suggests effective feedback may be able to advance pupils' achievement by about 5-7 months, with low attaining pupils finding the greatest benefit. Generally, feedback refers to "information given by a teacher to pupil(s) about their performance that aims to improve learning" (EEF, 2021, p. 7). As the EEF's new guidance report on teacher feedback outlines, feedback can:

- focus on different *content*;
- be delivered in different *methods*;
- be directed to different *people*; and
- be delivered at different *times*

Generally, the research shows that comment only feedback is superior to grade or mark only feedback. Feedback needs to be 'informative and descriptive' and should help students show where they are in relation to the learning goals and give strategies and advice on how to bridge the gap. Marking is less helpful when it focuses the student's mind on their positional level relative to other students in the class. The latter reinforces a performance orientation and can lead to maladaptive learning strategies, such as avoiding practising or trying now learning approaches. While plenty of research indicates that effective formative feedback approaches lead to increased pupil attainment, the research is often limited in that it fails to separate out the effect of the feedback from the wider approach within which this was used, for example whole group approaches or direct instruction. As well as suggesting the need for more research in this area, this points to the need for teachers to see formative assessment as part of a toolkit of effective strategies, or as a principle that underpins the use of other techniques, such as questioning skills.

Dialogic Teaching:
An intervention recently evaluated by the EEF that brings many of the above points to light is *dialogic teaching*. Building upon the dialogic teaching approach developed by Robin Alexander, the intervention "emphasises dialogue through which pupils learn to reason, discuss, argue, and explain, in order to develop their higher order thinking and articulacy" (Jay et al., 2017, p. 6). Unlike other approaches that focus separately on either teacher's talk or pupils' talk, dialogic teaching incorporates both and attends to the relationship between them.

While the approach can be rather complicated, it can be generally thought of as a shift away from the initiation-response-feedback patterns than most teachers are familiar with; that is, where the teacher poses a closed-ended question (initiation), one or multiple pupils provide an answer (response), and the teachers gives feedback on that answer (feedback). By contrast, dialogic teaching is a more cumulative and collective framing of classroom talk, where "questions are structured to provoke thoughtful answers; answers prompt further questions and are seen as the building blocks of dialogue rather than its terminal point; and individual teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil exchanges are chained into coherent lines of enquiry rather than left disconnected" (Jay et al., 2017, p. 10). While dialogic teaching introduces more structure into classroom talk, it does not limit teachers in adapting the approach to fit with their classroom and pupils.

Although there remains a need for further studies to examine dialogic teaching interventions over a longer period of time and to better disentangle the approach's influence from other factors, there exists considerable evidence for its efficacy. Across English, maths, and science curriculum areas, pupils can make up to two months of additional progress through dialogic teaching interventions, and research suggests that disadvantaged children may see the greatest benefits. At the same time, the approach is not straightforward to implement, and the efficacy trial by Jay et al. (2017) suggests that teachers may require more than two terms to fully embed dialogic teaching into their practice.

Options or Questions Regarding Key Issues and Debates:
The Evidence for Learning Toolkit (Australia's version of the EEF Toolkit) suggests that teachers should consider the following questions when implementing oral language interventions:
- How can you help students to make their learning explicit through verbal expression?
- 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?
- What training should the adults involved receive to ensure they model and develop students' oral language skills?

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

Additionally, a number of questions should be considered at the following levels:

Whole School Approach to Curriculum and Teaching
- What professional development time is allotted to ensuring school staff understand the importance of oral language skills to pupils' learning?
- What professional development is needed to develop your knowledge and understanding of new approaches? Have you considered professional development interventions which have been shown to have an impact in other schools?

Teacher Knowledge
- In the classroom, how can you promote and develop metacognition and self-talk related to your lesson objectives?
- What targeted supports do you have in place to ensure pupils' oral language skills are progressing?

Pupil Knowledge and Behaviours
- Which explicit strategies can you teach your pupils to help them plan, monitor, and evaluate specific aspects of their learning?
- How can you give them opportunities to use these strategies with support, and then independently?
- How can you ensure you set an appropriate level of challenge to develop pupils' metacognition and self-talk in relation to specific learning tasks?

Potential Implementation Issues to Consider:

The impact of oral language interventions can range from 5-7 months of additional progress, improved reading and writing outcomes and communication skills, and fewer behavioural issues following oral language activities. However, the success of an intervention appears to hinge on several key factors: (a) the subject areas targeted (impacts appear greatest for reading compared to math or science), (b) the caregivers involved (teaching assistants appear to have a similar impact delivering interventions as teachers), and (c) session frequency (three times per week or more appears ideal), and (d) the extent to which oral language activities are linked to the wider curriculum (e.g., using oral language activities to model technical language in science). Additionally, the available evidence suggests that interventions may particularly benefit pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, yet they may also require greater intensity of one-to-one support.

Notwithstanding the research-informed techniques presented above, it is critical that teachers have the agency to integrate the strategies themselves, using their own judgement. Studies suggests that teachers also prefer/need to see "living examples" of research-informed practices put into action by other professionals that they trust and respect before they try these out for themselves.

Finally, it is also important to appreciate the costs of interventions that target oral language skills. As the EEF Teaching and Learning Toolkit finds, the main costs arise from purchasing resources and ensuring school staff receive the professional training needed to embed new approaches into their practice. However, these costs tend to be low and occur primarily at the outset of an intervention.