

Young offenders need a verbal toolkit to unlock literacy

March 6 2013, by Pamela Snow



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Half of Australia's young male offenders have a clinically significant, previously unidentified language deficit.

It's a shocking figure that comes after [ten years worth](#) of research into the oral language skills of young people in the youth justice system.

For many of these young people their experience of education has been akin to a house built on shaky foundations. But now we know about the link between communication development and problems in later life, can we prevent more young people from ending up behind bars?

From speaking to writing

Clearly the links between oral language – talking and [listening skills](#) – and the transition to literacy needs to be the focus.

In modern western societies, it's difficult to think of a more important [metamorphosis](#) than the transition to literacy. Being literate is the basis for [academic success](#), which in turn, leads to social and economic engagement across the [lifespan](#).

But learning how to read and write is no trivial matter. Evidence from around the world clearly tells us that learning how to read is fundamentally a linguistic task. That is, it is a task that draws heavily on the oral language knowledge and skills that a child takes to school.

The ability, for example, to share one's own experiences and tell a story, draws on vocabulary, [sentence structure](#), sequencing and organisation, [responsiveness](#) to listener cues, and requires awareness of the social and [cultural context](#).

Other early psycholinguistic skills include phonemic and morphological awareness – the knowledge that words are made up of component sounds and [syllables](#).

At a disadvantage

Some children are immersed in language at home and arrive at school

with the foundations of their education "house" already starting to take shape.

Other children, however, for a variety of reasons, arrive at school with less elaborate vocabularies, immature sentence structure, and limited experience at modifying their language use in a given context.

Such children are not developmentally ready to cross the bridge to literacy. After all, they are moving from a medium that is biologically natural for humans (talking and listening) to one that is biologically unnatural and requires years of specific instruction (reading and writing).

Consider too, that when children in Australian schools reach Year 2, they have, whether they know it or not, come to the end of this period of formal instruction. This marks the subtle but important change of gear from learning to read to reading to learn.

It should not surprise us that at this point, so called "problem boys" make their presence felt in the classroom. They are now being asked to meet a much more complex set of expectations without the scaffolding needed for their fragile literacy skills.

In our research, these oral language deficits cannot be explained away by developmental disability, hearing loss, or acquired brain injury.

The Matthew Principle

Literacy researchers have invoked the biblical "Matthew Principle" to foreshadow the educational trajectories of those children whose oral language skills on school entry are not yet up to the task of crossing the bridge to literacy: "The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer".

In the end, these young people have overwhelmingly departed the

education system by Year 8, after long histories of mutual antipathy and underachievement.

But there are ways to combat the combination of behaviour problems and so-called "learning difficulties" in [young people](#). Underlying oral language skills need to be closely investigated by a speech pathologist, who should then work both with the child and the teacher to ameliorate the cancerous effects that undiagnosed (and hence untreated) language disorders can have on children's achievement.

In our house analogy, the builders need to retain the scaffolding for a longer period.

We also need to ensure that schools are fully appraised of the research on the oral [language skills](#) that underpin the transition to literacy, so that our early years teachers have the knowledge and skills needed to translate this evidence into practice.

They need to spend the necessary time building solid foundations for every child's education.

To do otherwise is to ignore unambiguous international evidence, and prevent large numbers of children from accessing the life-changing benefits of education.

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