

Research-informed perspectives on oral language as a foundation for learning

Anna Taylor

Speech and Language Specialist

PhD Candidate, Curtin University



#LaLYP



Objectives

In this session, we will...

1. Explore key theory and research insights into the links between oral language, learning, and literacy.
2. Discuss how oral language support can be integrated into a Response to Intervention (RtI) framework.

Turn-and-talk



When you think of literacy and learning, where does oral language fit in?

**Oral language is the foundation of literacy
and learning**

ORAL LANGUAGE

FORM

CONTENT

USE

Phonology

Syntax

Morphology

Semantics

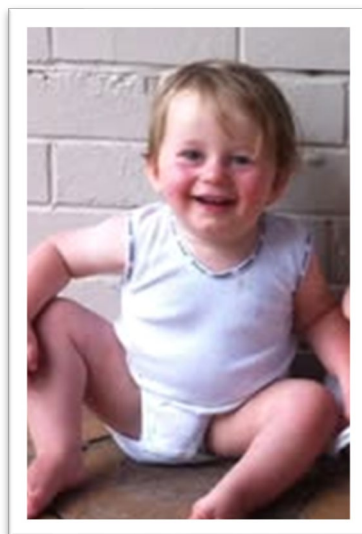
Pragmatics

(Bloom and Lahey, 1978)



Birth – 12m

- Responds to sounds
- Babbling
- First words emerge



1–2 years

- Word combinations
- Follows simple instructions
- First 50+ words



2–3 years

- Use short sentences
- Rapid vocab expansion (200 + words)
- Answers simple questions

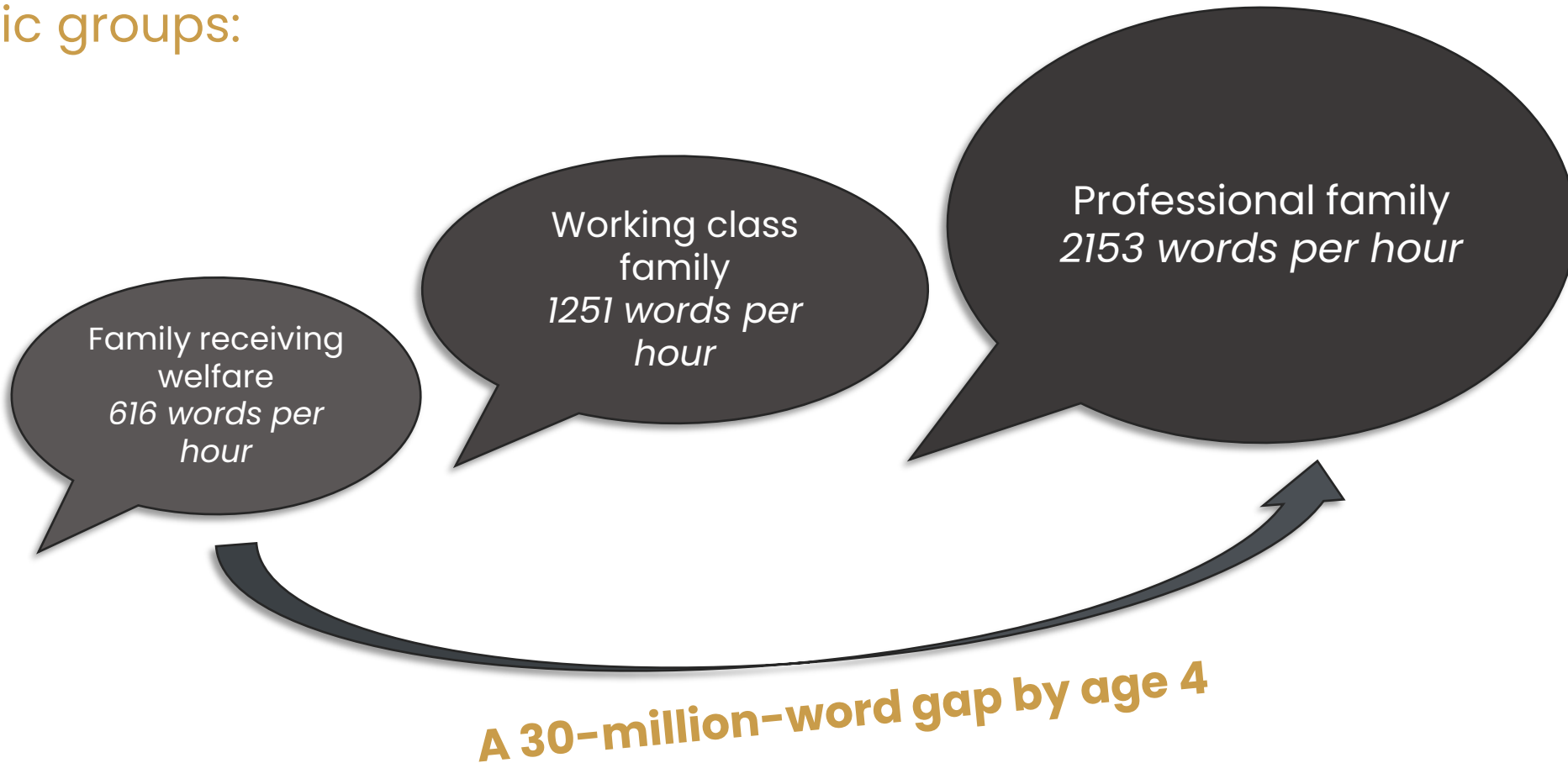


3–4 years

- Sentences lengthen
- Tells simple stories
- Speech mostly intelligible

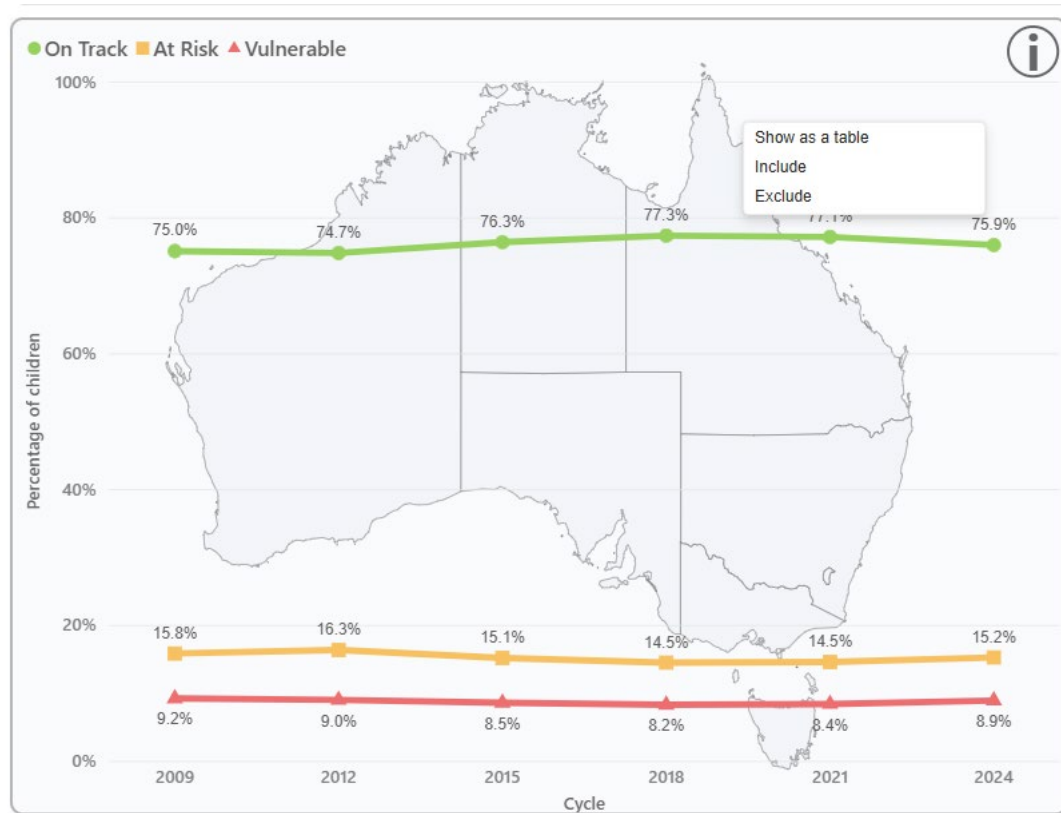
Hart & Risley (1995)

Compared minutes of verbal interaction per hour in families across three socio-economic groups:



Australian Early Development Census

Communication Skills and General Knowledge

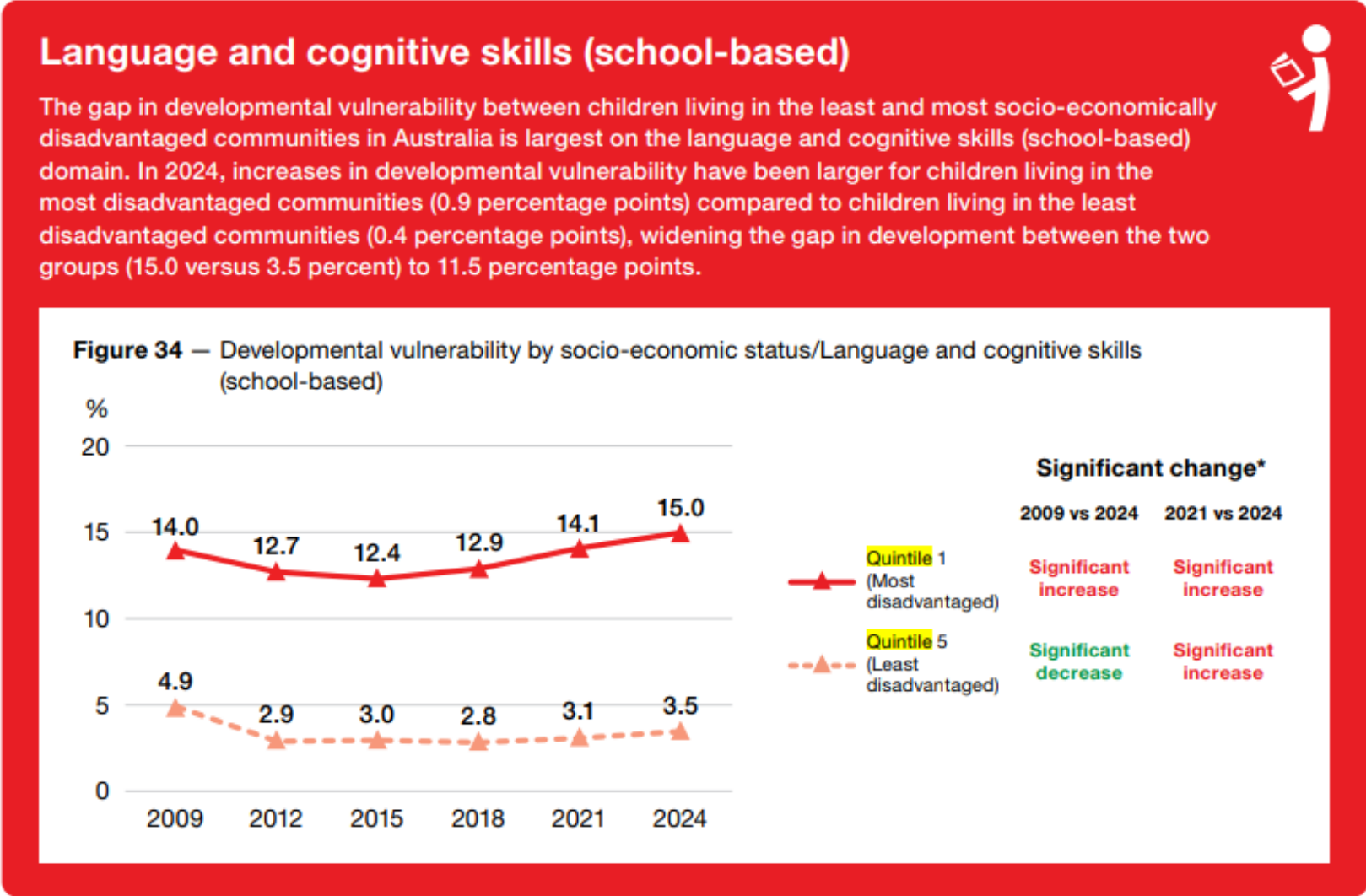


76% of children **developmentally on track**

24% of children **at risk** or **vulnerable**

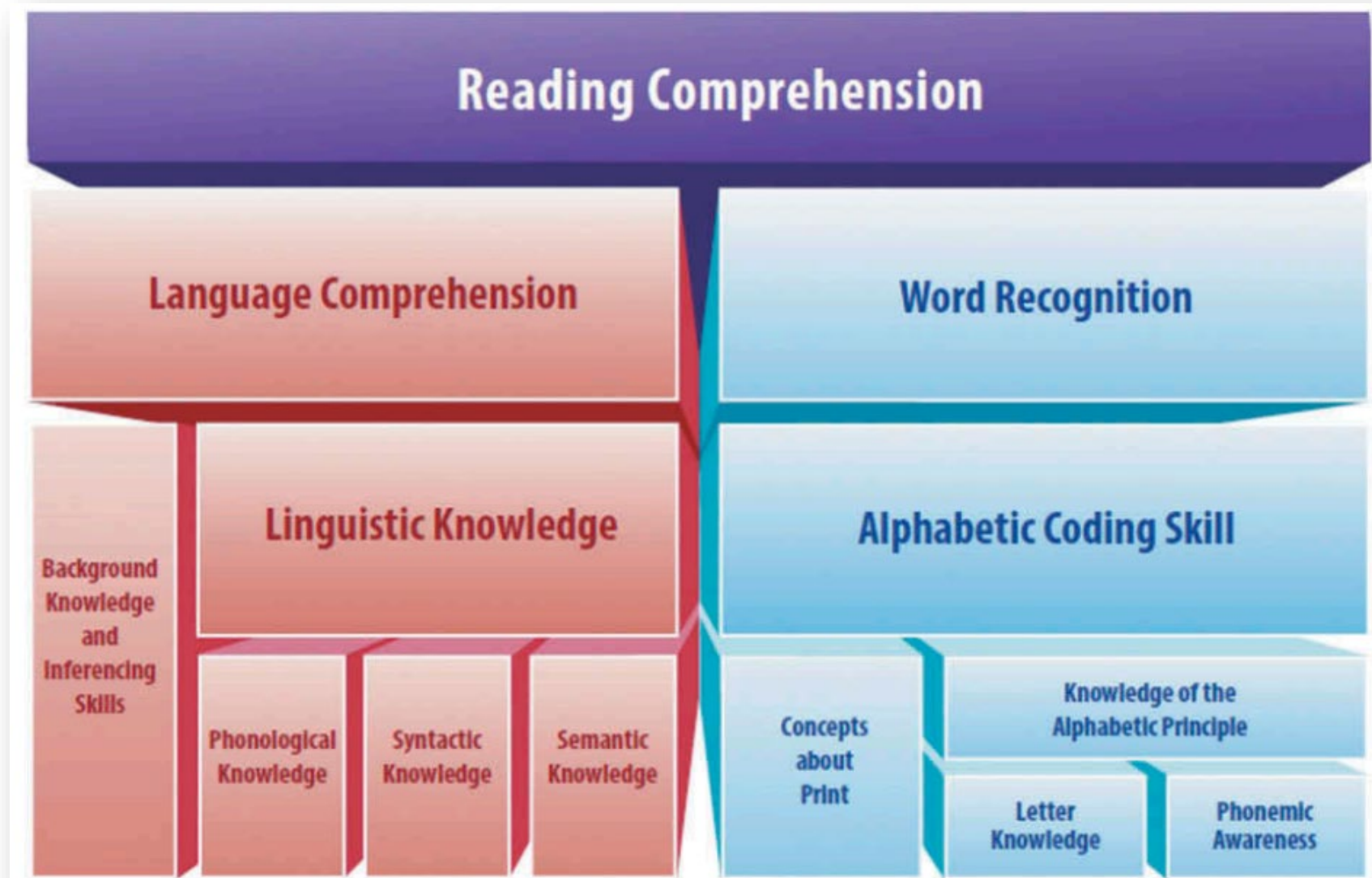
(Commonwealth of Australia, 2025)

The **gap in developmental vulnerability** between children living in the least and most socio-economically disadvantaged communities in Australia is **largest on the language and cognitive skills domain**



* Significant change text is colour coded green for a positive change and red for a negative change.

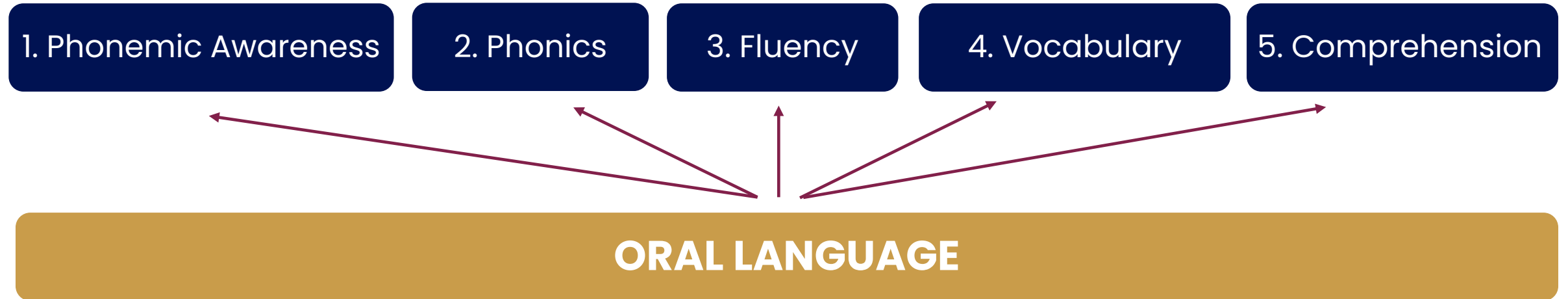
How oral language contributes to **reading**



(Tunmer & Hoover, 2019)

National Reading Panel (2000)

- Over 100,000 studies on reading instruction
- Identified **five essential components** of effective reading instruction



(National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000)

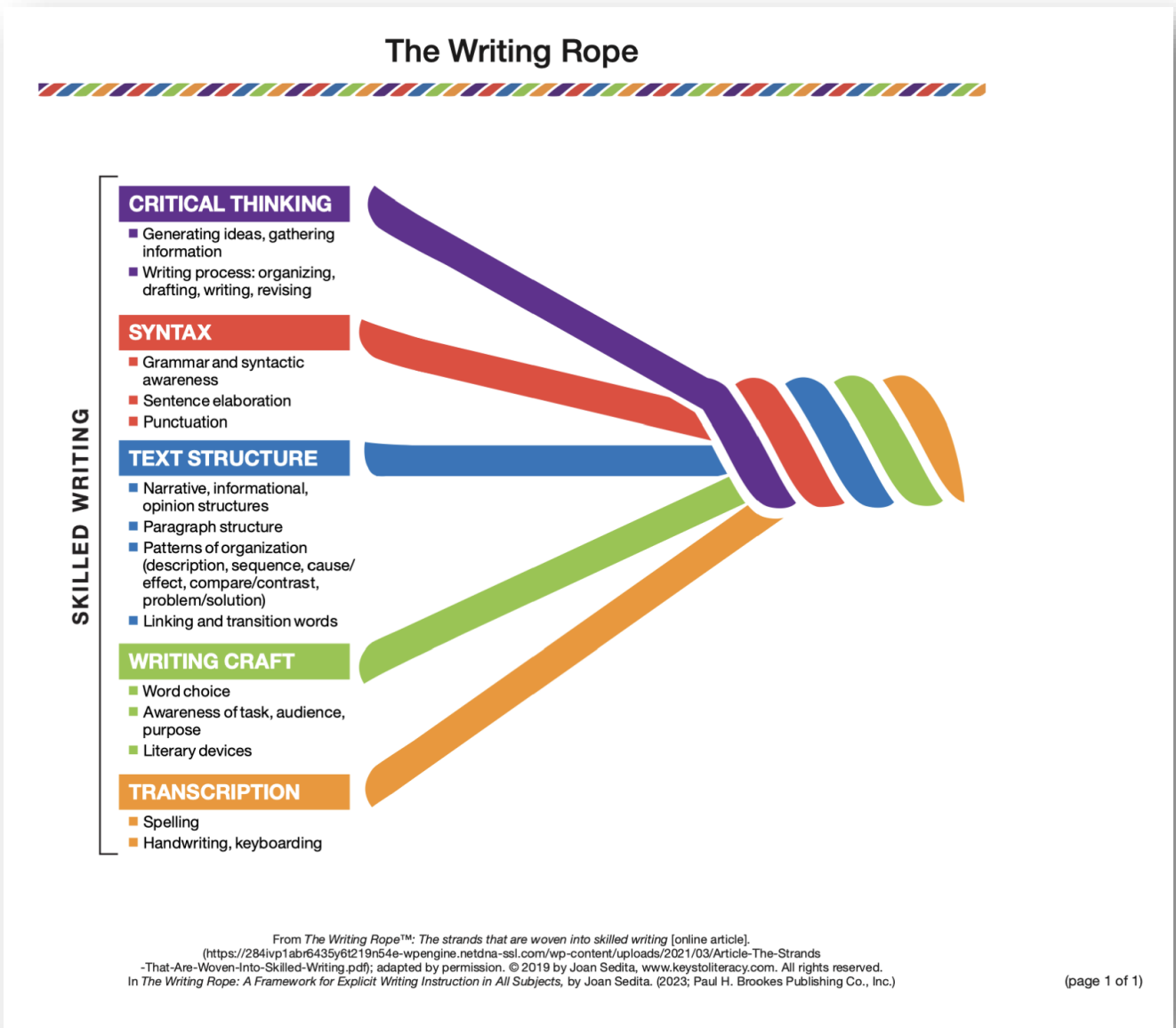
How oral language contributes to **writing**

Grammar

Discourse

**Vocabulary
Pragmatics**

Phonology



(Sedita, 2022)

Kim et al., 2015

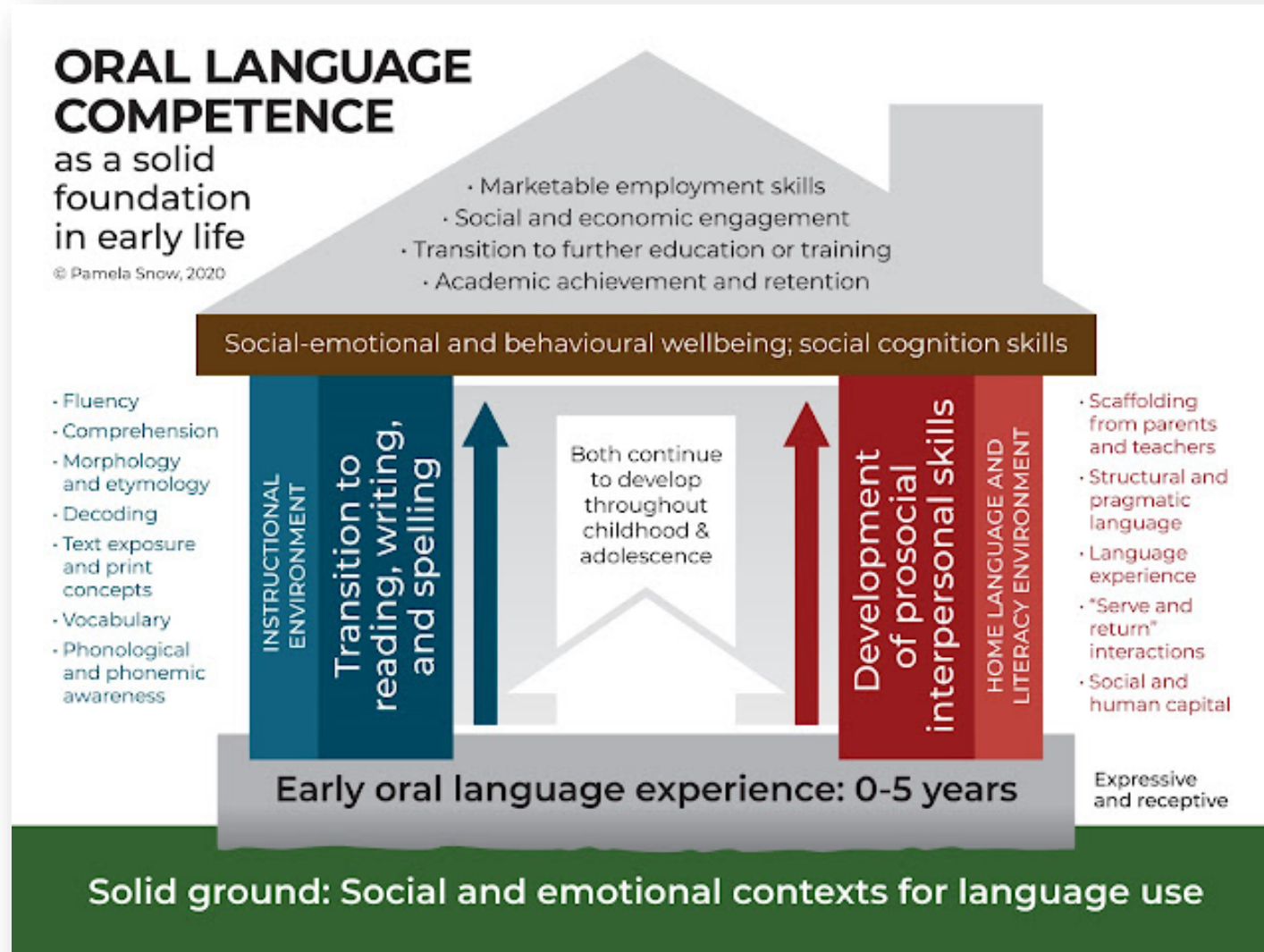


Explored which skills in Kindergarten predict writing performance in third grade
(n = 157)

- Significant predictors of narrative writing quality:
 - Early literacy skills (word reading, spelling)
 - Oral language skills (vocabulary, grammar)

Developing oral language skills alongside early literacy foundations is crucial for supporting children's later written expression

Oral language contributes to wellbeing, academic achievement and life success



Zeigenfusz et al., 2022

Systematic review of academic achievement of students with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD)

- 44 studies (2008–2020) on primary and secondary students with DLD
- Majority of research focused on literacy outcomes
- Strong evidence shows:
 - Increased risk of academic underachievement
 - Widespread impact across multiple curriculum areas

Children with language difficulties are at heightened risk of academic underachievement across the curriculum

Curtis et al., 2018

Meta-analysis to determine the impact of language disorders on behaviour in children (0–18)

- 47 studies encompassing a total of 65, 153 participants
- Children with language disorders exhibited a moderately higher level of problem behaviour (anxiety, depression, aggression, disruption) compared to peers
- Difference in problem behaviours increased with age

Children with language disorders are at significantly higher risk of exhibiting problem behaviors

Aims:

- Examine language abilities and functional use of language of Australian children at school entry
- Investigate the relationship among language profiles and functioning in life areas related to oral language at school entry

Participants and measures:

- Assessed 126 children in Terms 1 & 2 of Pre-primary (Foundation) on:
 - measures of oral language (vocabulary, grammar, discourse)
 - early academic performance
 - psychosocial functioning (e.g., behaviour, emotions, peer relationships)

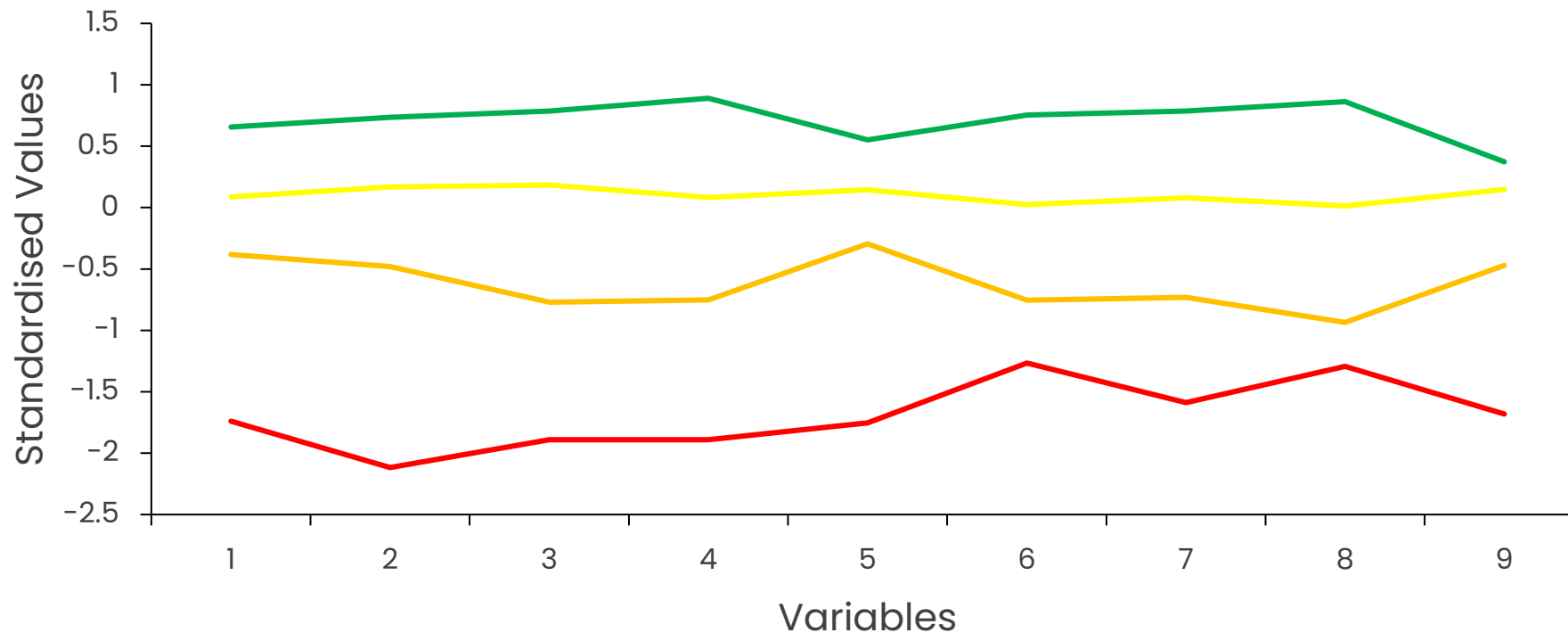
Four profiles of oral language at school entry

Profile 1: High (n = 43; 34%)

Profile 2: Average (n = 48; 38%)

Profile 3: Low (n = 21; 17%)

Profile 4: Very Low (n = 14; 11%)



72% typical
language

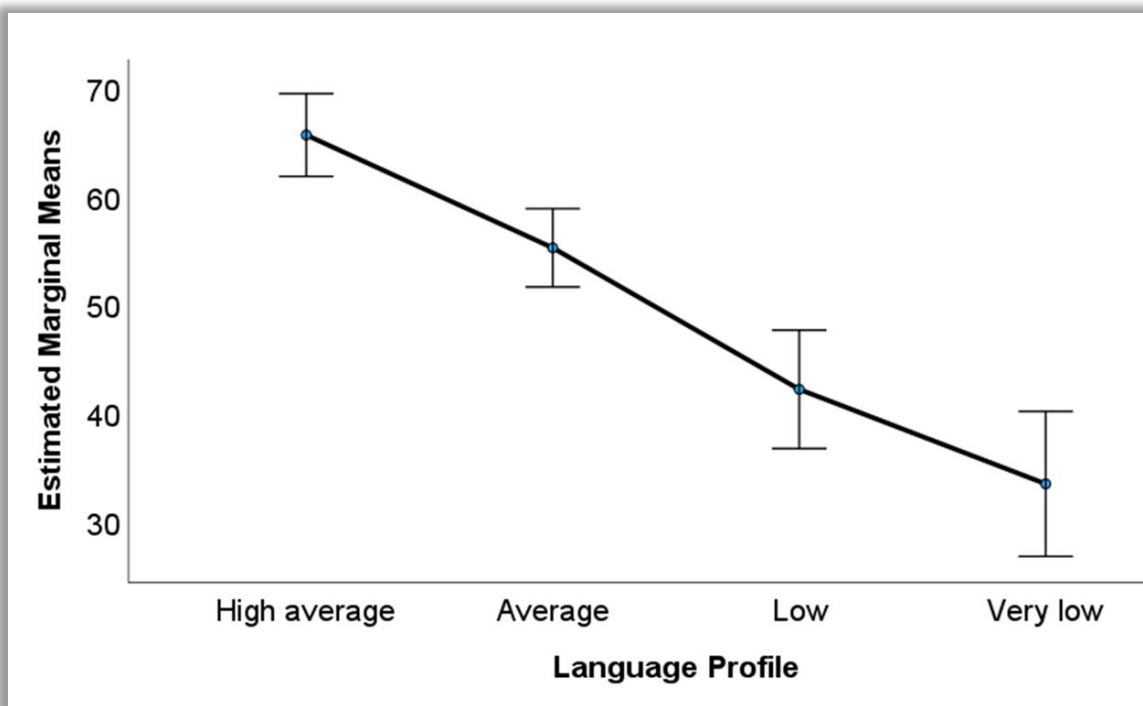
28%
language
difficulties

Note. 1 = CELF-P3 Sentence Comprehension; 2 = CELF-P3 Word Structure; 3 = CELF-P3 Expressive Vocabulary; 4 = CELF-P3 Recalling Sentences; 5 = GAPS Non-Word Repetition; 6 = SSNA total score; 7 = NCA inferential score; 8 = NCA literal score; 9 = FOCUS-34 total score

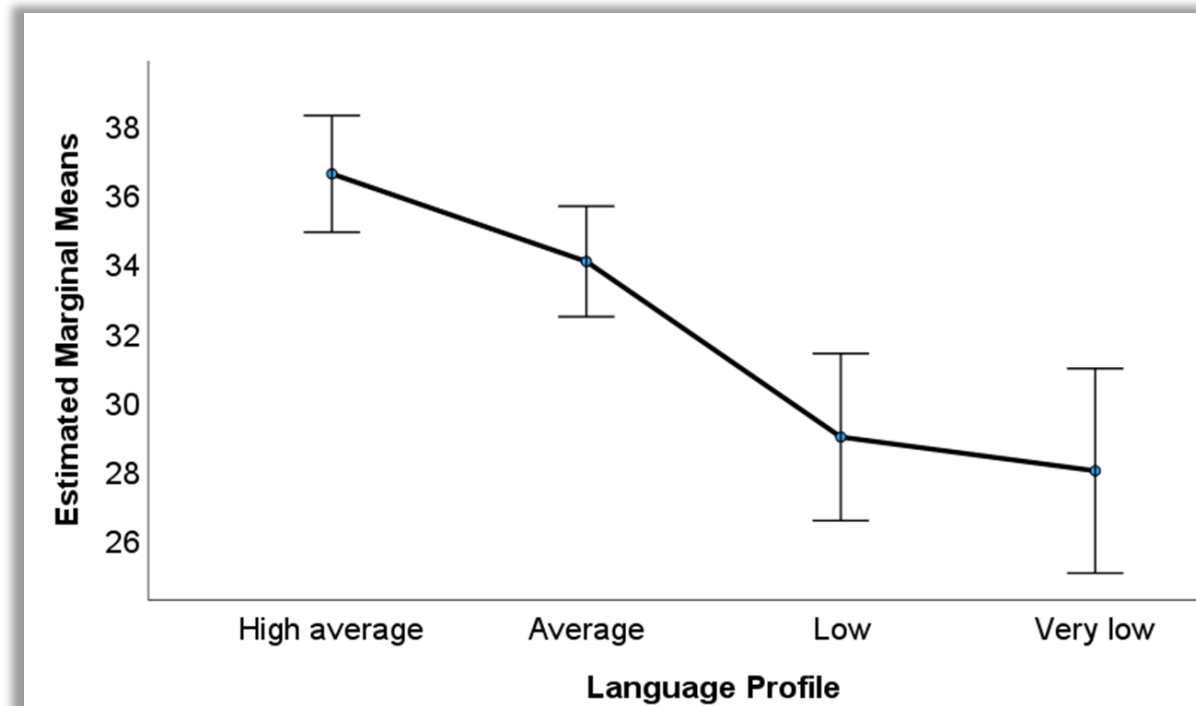
(Taylor et al., 2025)

Relationships among oral language and functioning

Early academic functioning



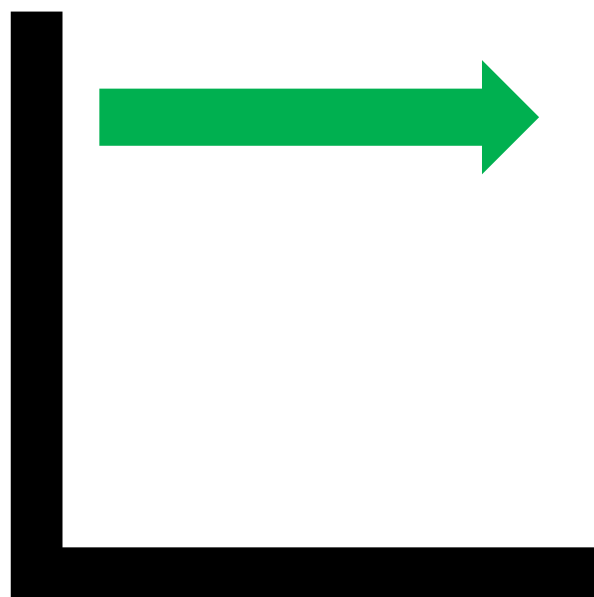
Psychosocial functioning



Follow-up study – 12 months later (Year 1)

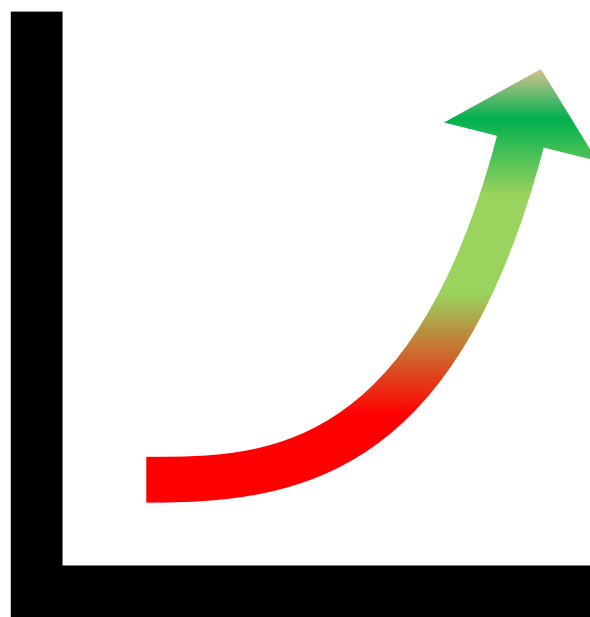


Stable – typical



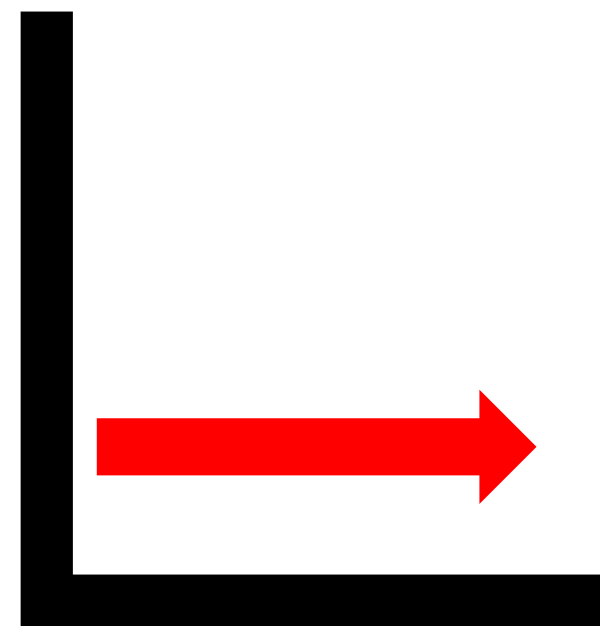
78%

Improving



4%

Stable – low



18%

(Taylor et al., under review)

Implications

- **1 in 4 Australian children** start school with oral language difficulties
- **Impacts on learning and socio-emotional development** can appear as **early as Term 2**
- Even **mild to moderate difficulties** can cause challenges in the classroom comparable to **severe difficulties**
- Most children with language difficulties **continue to experience them in Year 1**

Scan the QR code to read the full article:



Oral language is the foundation of literacy and learning

**There is a clear need for focused attention on oral
language in schools**

Addressing oral language in a school context

Turn-and-talk



*If your school could do **one thing** to best support oral language development for all students, what would it be?*

Addressing oral language in a Rtl framework

Tier 3A

1:1 intervention
delivered by
educators

Tier 3B

1:1 intervention
delivered by
speech paths

Children identified with
language disorder (e.g., DLD)

Tier 2

Small group intervention (published programs) for
at risk children delivered by educators

Children identified with
language difficulties

Tier 1

High quality teaching and oral language interactions for all

Whole class

Tier 1 – High quality teaching and oral language interactions for all



Whole-class, dedicated instructional time for the explicit teaching of oral language, embedded across curriculum areas

- Rich and robust **vocabulary** instruction and dialogic reading
- Implicit and explicit teaching of **grammar**
- Explicit teaching of **discourse** comprehension and production (imaginative, informative, persuasive texts)



Seminar 4 – Oral Language and Vocabulary Instruction in Primary School



Seminar 6 – Oral Language at the Discourse and Sentence Levels

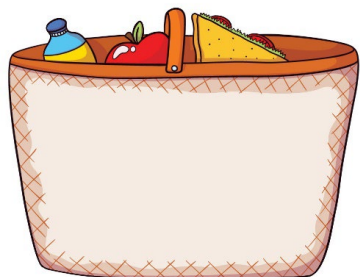
Tier 1 – High quality teaching and oral language interactions for all



Adult responsiveness strategies

- Modelling
- Recasting
- Expanding / extending

Recasting



Grammatical recasting

Child: Put apple in.

Adult: Ok, I'll put **this red** apple in. And what else should I add? Should I put this sandwich in?



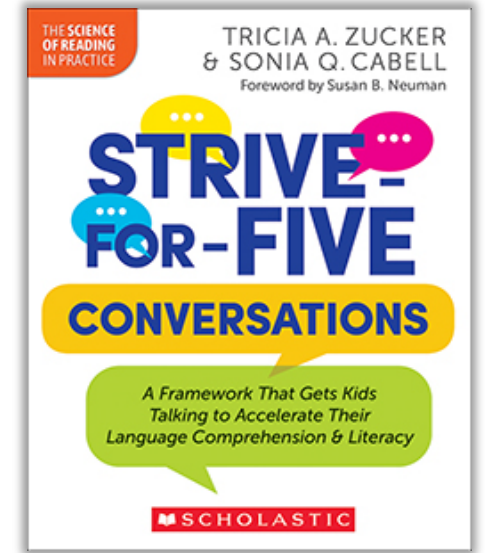
Vocabulary recasting

Child: That doggie digging a bone.

Adult: He's **burying** a bone, isn't he?

Extending conversations

GOAL: Have at least **FIVE** back and forth exchanges (or turns) between the child and the adult



1

Teacher

What do plants need to grow?

2

Student

Water and sun.

3

Teacher

Good thinking.
What does sunlight help the plant do?

4

Student

Um ... make food.

5

Teacher

That's right! That's called **photosynthesis**.



Tier 2 – small group oral language interventions

Characteristics of small group language interventions with **strong evidence**:

- Small group (3–5 students)
- Cover a combination of skills (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, narrative)
- Delivered by trained personnel
- Short, regular sessions (e.g., 4–5 times per week, 30 mins per day)
- Minimum 11-week duration

LanguageLift

Oral language intervention program

Foundation – Year 2

- Small group
- Scripted lessons
- Delivered by trained teachers or aides
- Targets oral language skills important for text comprehension
 - Vocabulary
 - Grammar
 - Oral narrative comprehension and production



LanguageLift Trial – 2021

Five schools, 45 students

- 20 weeks / 50 intervention lessons
- **Measures:** vocabulary, grammar, narrative comprehension and production
- Pre- and post-intervention testing



Results

- Statistically significant and substantial gains in oral language skills (Cohen's D effect sizes 1.02 – 1.73)
- Positive changes in classroom social, emotional and behavioural skills

Language area	Assessment	Age equivalent gain
Receptive grammar	CELF-P2 Sentence Structure CELF-P2 Sentence Comprehension	16 months 2 months
Expressive grammar	CELF-5 Word Structure CELF-P2 Word Structure	11 months 18 months
Narrative comprehension	TNL-2 Comprehension	13 months
Narrative productions	TNL-2 Production	12 months
Receptive vocabulary	PPVT-5	8 months

Tier 3

Tier 3A

Target group: Children with milder or less pervasive difficulties

Approach: Interventions designed and managed by SPs but delivered indirectly by trained educators

Evidence: When educators are well trained and supported children can make progress in language skills

Tier 3B

Target group: Children with complex and/or pervasive difficulties

Approach: Direct, individualised interventions provided by qualified speech pathologists

Evidence: Children with more severe language difficulties show significant progress following direct individualised intervention

Final reflection



What's one thing from today you can try or follow up on in your classroom or school?

Conclusion



- Oral language is the foundation of literacy and learning.
- Increased early and explicit attention to oral language is fundamental for improving outcomes
- Schools play a pivotal role and should provide dedicated instructional time to build oral language from school entry

References



Bloom, L., & Lahey, M. (1978). *Language development and language disorders*. John Wiley & Sons.

Commonwealth of Australia. (2025). *AEDC Data explorer*. <https://www.aedc.gov.au/data-explorer/>

Curtis, P. R., Frey, J. R., Watson, C. D., Hampton, L. H., & Roberts, M. Y. (2018). Language disorders and problem behaviors: A meta-analysis. *Pediatrics*, 142(2), e20173551. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2017-355>

Ebbels, S. H., McCartney, E., Slonims, V., Dockrell, J. E., & Norbury, C. F. (2019). Evidence-based pathways to intervention for children with language disorders. *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, 54(1), 3–19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1460-6984.12387>

Goldfeld, S., Beatson, R., Watts, A., Snow, P., Gold, L., Le, H. N. D., Edwards, S., Connell, J., Stark, H., Shingles, B., Barnett, T., Quach, J., & Eadie, P. (2022). Tier 2 oral language and early reading interventions for preschool to grade 2 children: A restricted systematic review. *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*, 27(1), 65–113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19404158.2021.201175>

Hart, B., & Risley, T. R. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*. Paul H. Brookes Publishing.

Kim, Y.-S., Al Otaiba, S., Folsom, J. S., Greulich, L. L., & Puranik, C. S. (2015). Kindergarten predictors of third grade writing. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 37, 27–37. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2014.11.002>

Paul, R. (2007). *Language disorders from infancy through adolescence: Assessment & intervention* (3rd ed.). Mosby Elsevier.

MultiLit (2022). *LanguageLift Manual*. MultiLit Pty Ltd.

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction* (NIH Publication No. 00-4769). U.S. Government Printing Office.

Sedita, J. (2022). *The Writing Rope: A Framework for Explicit Writing Instruction in All Subjects*. Brookes Publishing.

Snow, P. C. (2020). SOLAR: The science of language and reading. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*, 36(3), 198–211. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265659020947817>

Taylor, A., Boyes, M. E., Smart, S., Wheldall, R., Claessen, M., Gray, N., & Leitão, S. (2025). A multidimensional investigation of the oral language abilities of Australian school entrants. *International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17549507.2025.2541681>

Taylor, A., Boyes, M. E., Smart, S., Wheldall, R., Claessen, M., Vanludyt, E., & Leitão, S. (under review). *The stability of oral language profiles of children in the early years of school: A longitudinal comparison of multidimensional and cut-point approaches to classification*.

Tunmer, W. E., & Hoover, W. A. (2019). The cognitive foundations of learning to read: A framework for preventing and remediating reading difficulties. *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*, 24(1), 75–93. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19404158.2019.1614081>

Ziegenfusz, S., Paynter, J., Flückiger, B., & Westerveld, M. F. (2022). A systematic review of the academic achievement of primary and secondary school-aged students with developmental language disorder. *Autism & Developmental Language Impairments*, 7, Article 23969415221099397. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23969415221099397>

Zucker, T., & Cabell, S. Q. (2023). *Strive-for-Five conversations: A framework that gets kids talking to accelerate their language comprehension and literacy*. Scholastic.



SUPPORT RESEARCH ON CHILD WELLBEING!



Do you know a
child in year 6 and
their caregiver?

Scan the QR code to register
interest in helping researchers
investigate language, reading,
and mental health in the transition
to high school.



COMPLETE A SURVEY AND LANGUAGE AND
READING TASKS, ONLINE OR IN-PERSON FOR
1.5 HOURS.

ALL KIDS GET A GIFT VOUCHER!



Research Opportunity

For Year 6 students

1. Respond to some survey questions about yourself, school, and your relationships.
2. Do some reading and language activities.
3. Get a gift voucher.
4. Follow-up in year 7.

Thank you

Anna Taylor

Anna.Taylor@multilit.com



Catholic
Education
Tasmania