

Business leaders: Closing literacy skills gap vital for young people to thrive in digital-first workplace

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The literacy skills young people need to thrive in work are changing more rapidly than ever before but current education and policy systems are not keeping pace, creating a worrying skills gap that could undermine young people's prospects, according to a new paper published today by the [National Literacy Trust](#).

The future of literacy: The human advantage, supported by KPMG UK, draws on insights from UK businesses, teachers and young people on the current literacy landscape and predicts the literacy skills young people will need to thrive in current and future workplaces, which are being continually shaped by technological, social, cultural and academic forces. Representatives from Audible, Into Film, Irwin Mitchell, London Luton Airport, Pan Macmillan, Pearson, PwC and The Very Group were interviewed for the paper.

Oracy, written and critical literacy were identified as essential skills for effectively leveraging AI, navigating complex digital environments and contributing meaningfully to workplaces; while a lifelong learning mindset, rooted in reading for pleasure, was seen as a key determinant for success in a continually changing workplace.

Employers consistently rank communication and interpersonal skills amongst the most in-demand [2]. But despite the wide-ranging benefits of speaking and listening skills for workplace readiness, there is currently no national guidance on the components of oracy or how it should be taught in schools. While the government has recently set out its [ambition](#) to prioritise oracy education in [reforms to the national curriculum in England](#), more detail on its implementation and support for teachers will be crucial for

success [3].

The need for a greater focus on oracy education to close the workplace skills gap is further underscored by the concurrent publication of new research from the National Literacy Trust today, based on the charity's 2025 annual literacy survey of 105,583 children and young people aged 8 to 18 and 2,908 teachers from schools across the UK [4] (attached).

The report found that young people's confidence in practical speaking and listening skills, such as those used in the classroom or formal settings, declines most sharply at the point when children move from primary to secondary school – at the same stage that teachers also report formal oracy activities aren't as widely encouraged. Meanwhile, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds face the greatest confidence challenges.

Young people aged 11-14 report significantly lower confidence levels across a range of speaking and listening skills than their peers aged 8-11, including asking teachers questions (12.8 percentage point gap; 61.9% vs 74.7%), speaking in front of an audience (10.1 pp gap; 38.6% vs 48.7%), speaking up in lessons (8.1 pp gap; 46.5% vs 54.6%) and giving a presentation (7.3 pp drop; 45.7% vs 53.0%) [5].

This coincides with teachers reporting a decline in the prevalence of structured oracy activities between primary and secondary school, such as debate and presentations (12.1 pp gap; 76.4% vs 64.3%) and encouraging reading aloud (25.5 pp gap; 96.9% vs 71.4%) [6].

Meanwhile, children and young people who don't receive free school meals reported being more confident in all oracy skills compared with their peers who receive free school meals. Some of the widest gaps identified relate to expressing ideas (65.0% vs 58.1%), giving a presentation (49.4% vs 42.6%) and challenging others' views (64.0% vs 57.2%).

Jonathan Douglas CBE, Chief Executive of the National Literacy Trust, said: "Far from being rendered redundant by technological advances, the core literacy skills young people need to thrive in education, work and life are more important than ever. But we're seeing a troubling disconnect when it comes to the agility of our education and policy systems to equip young people with the changing literacy skills they will need to thrive in digital-first workplaces – with those from disadvantaged backgrounds disproportionately impacted.

"Strong literacy skills shape how young people learn, support social and emotional development, enable civic engagement and underpin success in the workplace. By recognising where these literacies overlap in classrooms, workplaces and communities, we can break down barriers to opportunity, empower young people to influence, advocate and communicate with confidence, and ensure all children and young people can thrive in the digital age."

To tackle the literacy skills gap, the paper recommends that employers, educators and policymakers work together to ensure policy and practice keep pace with technological change and respond to both the opportunities and challenges that digital advancements present [7].

To support a greater focus on oracy education, the National Literacy Trust has recently launched its flagship oracy programme, the Young Voices Programme, which builds partnerships between schools and employers to help grow the next generation of confident communicators – the nation's future thinkers, leaders, storytellers and changemakers. Businesses and school can find out more

at: literacytrust.org.uk/programmes/young-voices/

Today's paper is the second in the National Literacy Trust's *Future of Literacy* series which explores how the digital world is reshaping literacy and the skills children and young people need to thrive – both today and in the future. The series will offer a hopeful vision where literacy is not a barrier but instead a bridge to opportunity, equity and lifelong learning.

For more information about the *Future of Literacy* series, visit: literacytrust.org.uk/future-of-literacy/