

Words for Work: Developing young people's communication skills needed for employment

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March 2023

Many employers bemoan a lack of communication skills relevant to the workplace in their workforce, particularly with their younger intake. This report shows that providing young people who aren't confident communicators with structured oracy and writing activities as well as real-world opportunities to practise those skills with business professionals can improve their communication skills, build their confidence and inspire them to pursue their goals.

An individual's literacy skills influence their employment and earnings later in life¹ and the relationship between literacy levels and employment in England is the strongest in the OECD². Indeed, it is estimated that the average 18-year-old with very poor literacy will earn around £33,000 less over their lifetime than if they had basic literacy skills³.

Literacy and communication skills are vitally important in the workplace, with higher levels of essential skills such as speaking, listening, leadership and teamwork being associated with higher incomes and reducing the probability of being out of work⁴. Such skills are highly valued by employers, and in 2022, Teach First found that broad "soft skills" such as

¹ [Morrisroe \(2014\)](#)

² [OECD \(2012\)](#)

³ [Kerr \(2021\)](#)

⁴ [Seymour and Craig \(2022\)](#)

communication and presenting, as well as literacy and numeracy skills, were among the top factors considered by employers when recruiting young people⁵.

However, 72% of these employers were concerned about young people's level of broader skills for the workplace, such as communication and presentation, and 68% showed concern about their levels of literacy and numeracy skills⁶. These concerns about the absence of relevant workplace skills can make employers hesitant to recruit young people⁷ and presents a barrier to employment. Meanwhile, young people themselves have shown decreased confidence in applying for work, and passing interview and selection processes in 2022 compared to previous years, as found by the Youth Voice Census⁸, with only a third of young people saying they understood the skills employers were looking for.

Learning loss caused by the pandemic has made improving the literacy and communication skills of young people entering the workplace even more of a priority. In 2022, over half of employers reported concerns that lost learning from the pandemic would worsen the skills shortage amongst young people⁹, and the disruption to education, harm to communication skills, and obstruction to careers guidance is thought to have almost definitely magnified the existing disparities between advantaged and disadvantaged young people entering the workplace¹⁰.

Particular focus on young people from disadvantaged backgrounds

Findings from the 2022 Youth Voice Census¹¹ show that young people eligible for free school meals (FSMs) were less likely to be 'confident' in all skills compared with their peers who did not receive FSMs. Young people aged 19 and over who had received FSMs were also less likely to say they understood the skills employers were looking for and to agree they were confident in writing a good CV or application form, preparing for and attending an interview or an assessment centre, or confident that they were prepared to start employment. Evidence also suggests that stereotypes relating to socioeconomic status can reduce career self-efficacy and restrict the education and employment options that disadvantaged pupils perceive as available to them¹². Indeed, by the age of 15, high-achieving disadvantaged young people across OECD countries are 4 times less likely to hold high occupational aspirations than their similarly performing, more advantaged peers¹³.

Research also indicates that those from less advantaged backgrounds have fewer opportunities to build their essential skills in school compared to their more advantaged peers, which subsequently leads to them having lower skill levels¹⁴. However, individuals who

⁵ [Teach First \(2022\)](#)

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ [Richmond and Regan \(2022\)](#)

⁸ [Youth Employment UK \(2022\)](#)

⁹ [Teach First \(2022\)](#)

¹⁰ [Office for Students \(2022\)](#)

¹¹ [Youth Employment UK \(2022\)](#)

¹² [Hunt et al. \(2021\)](#)

¹³ [Mann et al. \(2020\)](#)

¹⁴ [Seymour and Craig \(2022\)](#)

did have greater opportunities to improve their essential skills at school showed increased scores in these skills compared to otherwise similar peers.

The Sutton Trust has highlighted that the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on disadvantaged young people will have knock-on effects on social mobility¹⁵. Compared to a long-term negative impact of £1,570 on the earnings of men from non-disadvantaged backgrounds and £710 for women from non-disadvantaged backgrounds, learning loss is estimated to have a much higher long term negative impact on the earnings of those from disadvantaged backgrounds, at around £3,870 for men and £3,800 for women¹⁶.

Providing disadvantaged young people with the opportunity to build on vital skills such as speaking, listening, presenting, and working in teams is therefore of particular relevance when considering social mobility.

Words for Work

The National Literacy Trust Words for Work programme supports young people from disadvantaged areas to develop their literacy and communication skills at key stages in their education, from starting school to the final years of studying.

Within secondary schools, sixth form and colleges, students take part in a Words for Work programme over six weeks, giving them opportunities to connect with positive working role models and meaningful career encounters.

Young people develop their formal communication skills and confidence within their oracy through the programme. As part of the programme, students take part in a Business Immersion workshop to meet volunteers from different roles and industries. This provides them an opportunity to practise formal greetings and questioning to gain knowledge of jobs and skills, and confidence in their ability to communicate with new people in a professional context. In addition, students have an opportunity for a workplace visit at the end of the programme to inspire them and demonstrate literacy skills within different jobs roles in a working environment.

The students then work on a range of activities to develop their formal communication skills, from writing emails, presenting, pitching, mock interviews and structured discussion. They also get opportunities to meet business volunteers who mentor the students, feeding back their own experiences of formal communication and advice from their working lives.

Supporting young people to build the communication skills they need to support their future employability

Words for Work improves young people’s understanding of the specific communication skills needed in the workplace (see Figure 1)¹⁷. For example, more than 9 in 10 young people told us that they had a better understanding of the difference between formal and informal situations (93.2%) and how to speak and act when meeting employers (91.9%). Nearly 9 in 10 (89.0%) also felt they understood better what may be expected of them in a job interview.

Figure 1: Percentage of young people who reported having a better understanding of workplace communication after Words for Work



In addition, more than 4 in 5 young people reported having a better understanding of how to greet people in formal situations (85.9%) and how to deliver a formal pitch, presentation or speech (81.3%). Young people also highlighted their increased understanding around these in their open-ended comments:

“I think Words for Work is good because it has helped me understand how and when I should act formally and how I can present information in front of people.” (Girl, Year 9)

“It did help with understanding of formal and informal situations.” (Girl, Year 9)

“Meeting the volunteers helped me improve on my communication skills towards new people.” (Girl, Year 12)

“[I learned] how to speak to people formally and how to project my voice.” (Boy, Year 8)

“I love when we had to make a presentation about what I want to be in the future. It really helped me to communicate with my peers.” (Girl, Year 8)

Overall, nearly 4 in 5 young people (78.7%) told us they had a better understanding of workplace communication in general and this was also reflected in their comments:

“[I have been inspired to] work on my communication skills and develop my understanding of how to speak to people in the workplace.” (Girl, Year 9)

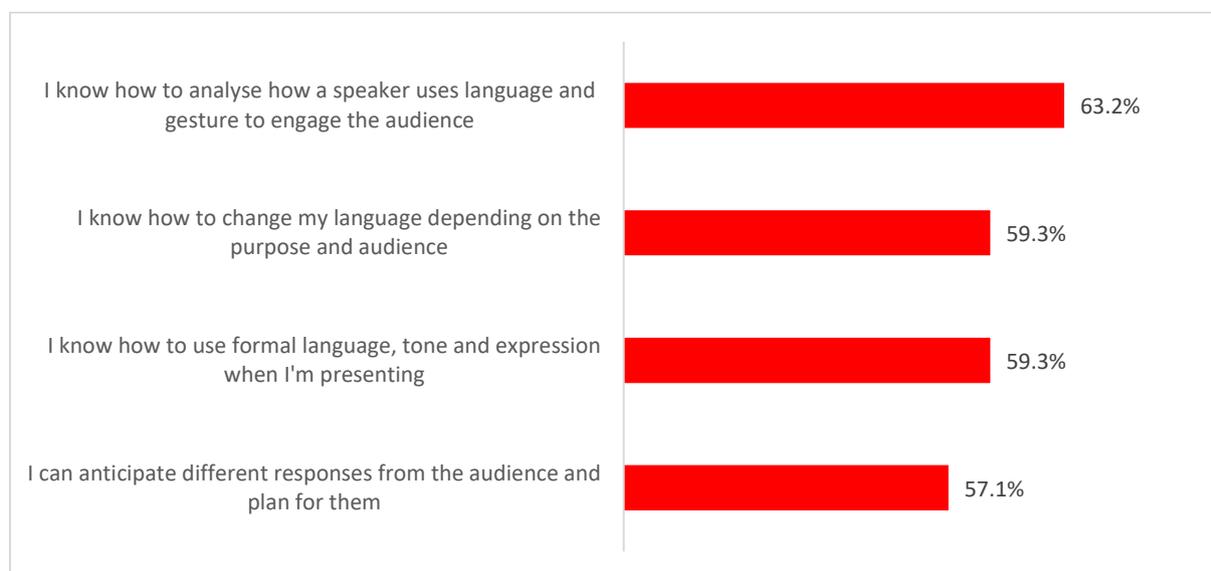
Words for Work also successfully supports young people’s communication skills more generally (see Figure 2). As a result of taking part in the programme, more than 3 in 5 (63.2%) young people said they knew more about how to analyse how a speaker uses language and gesture to engage an audience. Around 3 in 5 young people knew more about how to use formal language, tone and expression when presenting (59.3%) and how to change their language depending on their audience and purpose (59.3%). Similarly, just under 3 in 5 (57.1%) said they knew more about how to anticipate different responses from their audience and how they can plan for them. Comments from young people also indicated that their communication skills had benefited from the programme:

“I learnt how to communicate effectively with people.” (Girl, Year 13)

“I think it is a good programme where I can learn and improve my speaking and learning skills.” (Girl, Year 12)

“It makes [you] even better in your communication skills.” (Girl, Year 8)

Figure 2: Percentage of young people who reported having better communication skills overall after Words for Work



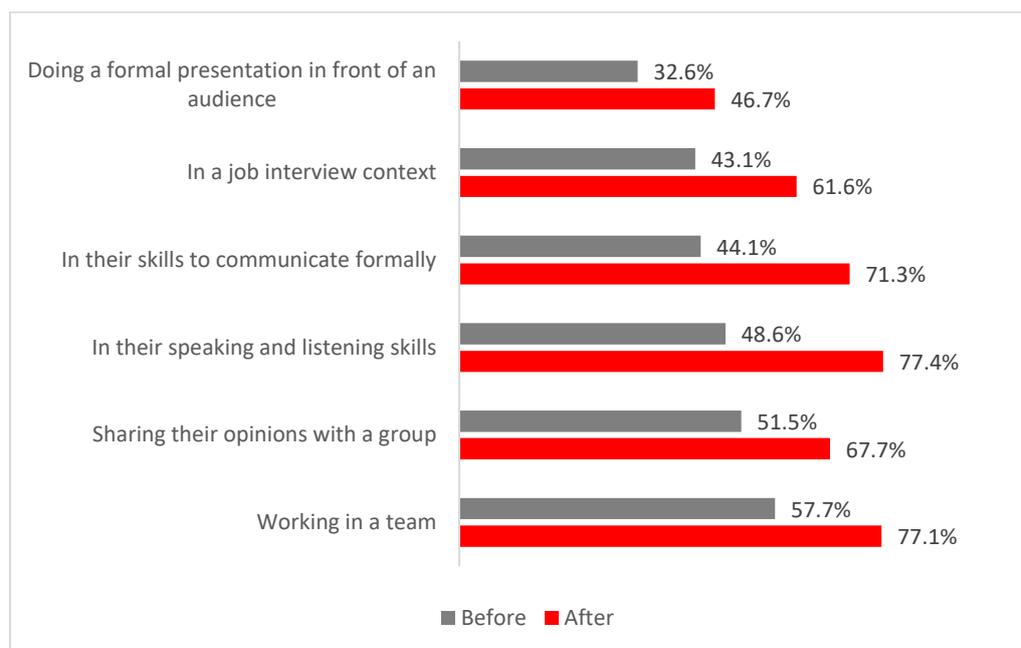
The importance of communication confidence

We know that many young people don’t feel confident communicating¹⁸ and fewer than 1 in 10 secondary school teachers told us that their school has a consistent approach towards

¹⁸ [Clark \(2011\)](#)

developing the confidence and competence of young people's speaking and listening skills¹⁹. Thus, a crucial element of supporting young people's communication skills is also to build their confidence to communicate. Indeed, many young people lacked confidence communicating before taking part in Words for Work: less than half reported being confident in their speaking and listening skills (48.6%) and in their confidence to communicate formally (44.1%; see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Changes in young people's confidence in their communication skills



However, Words for Work works on this, significantly increasing young people's communication confidence across a wide range of areas. For example, 77.4% of young people felt confident in their speaking and listening skills after taking part in the programme, while 71.3% felt more confident in their ability to communicate formally. The percentage of young people who felt confident sharing opinions with a group increased from 51.5% to 67.7% and the percentage of those who felt confident working in a team from 57.7% to 77.1%.

Many young people taking part in the programme also comment on their increased confidence as one of the benefits of taking part:

“Confidence! Confidence! Confidence!” (Boy, Year 13)

“To stay confident, keep believing in myself and not to let errors hurt my public speaking.” (Boy, Year 12)

“It helped me build confidence to give speeches and interviews.” (Boy, Year 12)

“I don't feel afraid anymore when doing presentations in front of people.” (Girl, Year 8)

“[Words for Work] helps young children feel more confident in things we thought we never would.” (Girl, Year 9)

“[I feel more inspired to] have self-confidence and always stand up for myself” (Girl, Year 8)

Young people’s career and education aspirations

Nearly all young people have career- and education-focused aspirations. However, we also know that many see confidence, other people’s negative attitudes, and lack of opportunities to gain experiences they need as barriers for achieving these²⁰. Aspirations have also been linked to the sources of inspiration young people have available to them²¹. A lack of mentors, opportunities and resources can obstruct the formation of aspirations for disadvantaged young people²². Providing the opportunities to meet business volunteers is therefore not just important for young people’s communication skills but also in inspiring them and minimising the barriers they see to their future goals and dreams.

Many young people who took part in Words for Work told us that they now thought they would achieve the aspirations they have for the future. For example, they told us that:

“I think this program helps children with big aspirations gain the confidence they may need [...] for a job/ job interview.” (Girl, Year 8)

“[I have been inspired to] keep the same confidence I have to be able to achieve my goals for the future” (Girl, Year 9)

“I feel more encouraged to go into the career I wanted to go into.” (Girl, Year 13)

“It changed my mind-set on things and what I want to do in life and how I achieve them.” (Girl, Year 8)

In some comments, young people even mentioned specific careers and goals they now felt more empowered to pursue:

“[I have been inspired] to go into interviews in a publishing company because I want to be a writer.” (Boy, Year 13)

“[I have been inspired to] follow my career path in graphic designing and be more confident with interviews.” (Girl, Year 12)

“[I have been inspired to] achieve the goal I set after I leave Year 11, which is to work hard and become an accountant.” (Boy, Year 10)

When asked to elaborate on what the programme had inspired them to do, many commented on taking opportunities and trying their best, with several mentioning their commitment to achieving their goals for the future. Many also commented on their improved confidence,

²⁰ [Teravainen-Goff, Hackett and Clark \(2020\)](#)

²¹ [Cabinet Office Social Exclusion Task Force \(2008\)](#)

²² [Gutman and Akerman \(2008\)](#)

with several referencing their confidence in public speaking and presenting to audiences in particular. Several of these responses can be seen in the word cloud below.

Figure 4: Responses to the prompt 'After taking part in the programme, I feel more inspired to....'



Conclusion

In the aftermath of the pandemic, both learning loss from school closures and concerns from employers about the existing skills shortage have made improving the employability skills of young people even more of a priority than before. Programmes such as Words for Work are therefore needed now more than before to prepare young people for employment and minimise the barriers they may face in the world of work.

This report demonstrates that providing young people with low literacy structured oracy and writing activities, and real-world opportunities to practise those skills with business professionals can improve young people's communication skills, build their confidence and inspire them to pursue their goals.