

Martyn Oliver's speech at Voice 21's Speaking Summit 2026

20.3.2026 - | Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs

Ofsted's Chief Inspector, Sir Martyn Oliver, spoke at Voice 21's Speaking Summit in London.

A child's first word is never an accident.

That unique moment, when it comes, happens because someone spoke to that child, again and again, long before they could reply.

They heard language modelled. They absorbed rhythm and tone through being read bedtime stories. And one day, they joined in.

That first word is the start of something extraordinary. It's the beginning of a lifetime of communication, of connection, and learning.

And an important part of Ofsted's job is to make sure that vocabulary and communication grow richer with every year of a child's education.

Today I want to talk about how Ofsted's renewed framework is ensuring that happens. How we set expectations that move from children experiencing songs and rhymes in the early years to learning to discuss and debate well as they mature through their education.

Because good communication, and being able to understand and articulate yourself clearly, is the foundation for so much in life.

For learning, of course. But also, for building the skills and relationships that see us through our entire lives. Navigating disagreements respectfully, telling people close to us what we need, or being fully equipped to make the most of opportunities when they come our way.

And a skill that forms part of that foundation for good communication is, of course, reading.

Reading, listening and oracy

The National Year of Reading campaign to inspire young people to make reading part of their lives is an important one, because there are decades of research showing the link between reading, speaking and listening - and that this link is reciprocal. Speaking and listening are at the heart of all language development, and they are a foundation for good reading.

Oral language underpins reading comprehension - and poor oral language is more likely to affect comprehension than 'word reading'. So, children with limited vocabulary or grammar are far more likely to be poorer in their understanding, even if they are good 'word readers'.

It's clear, then: children need strong oral language comprehension skills to be able to understand the things they read. But 20% of children start school below the expected level for speech and language skills.

High-quality oracy education can provide the language-rich environment that helps these children

catch up with their peers.

Reading is a powerful way to develop new vocabulary and other comprehension skills. It exposes children to language and vocabulary they are not normally likely to hear in everyday speech. Reading books is their entry into a world of words that's richer than everyday spoken language.

Within that world of words, children need to read widely and read texts that are difficult enough so that they encounter new words. As their vocabulary grows, children can read and learn from books with more complex language structures and vocabulary.

You cannot discuss what you cannot name. You cannot debate ideas you have no words for. Speaking, listening and reading together build that vocabulary, which fuels confidence, which encourages participation, which sets children on the road to success.

Telling the Story report

The backdrop here is a complex one.

Our Telling the Story report, published in 2024, found that the teaching of reading had improved. Investment in phonics has made a difference, and teachers have the right training to feel more confident in this area.

But that progress can drop off.

Once pupils can read accurately, there is often less clarity on what comes next. Schools are less clear about how to build fluency and comprehension. Weaker readers, including in secondary schools, are not always supported to catch up with their peers.

The report also highlighted that spoken language was not always well developed in schools. Although schools understand that spoken language underpins pupils' reading and writing development, they do not always consider spoken language well in their English curriculum.

I'm sure that's not the case here, with you all attending the Voice 21 conference!

And so, we welcome further guidance for schools through the Department for Education's proposed oracy frameworks.

Our renewed framework for education inspection is designed to ensure that the good work on learning to read continues to improve. And that communication - spoken as well as written - is pushed and developed throughout the entire education journey.

A story about communication

But before we get into the detail of the framework, I want to pause and tell a story myself.

Last year, I visited Stockport College. It was a really engaging day at a great, modern campus. And while I was there, I met a remarkable young person.

She told me about her interest in public speaking and her involvement in her college's debating club. She was confident and clearly passionate about what she was doing.

During our conversation, I asked her a question. I said: 'how would you feel about introducing me on stage at the Birmingham ICC?' For those of you who know it - it's rather large!

The event was just a few weeks away, in a big room, in front of hundreds of professional adults. And she jumped at the chance.

And I will say – she was fantastic!

Getting up there, in front of hundreds of people, microphone in hand. That is a big achievement for anyone. For a young person, it takes real courage.

But she was able to do that because she had been nurtured, challenged and supported – by her parents and by her teachers. By the staff at her college who gave her the space to practise, to fail, to improve. All of that contributed to making her a brilliant and confident communicator.

That story really brings me joy. I enjoy retelling it.

But I also want to be clear that oracy is not just about public speaking, is it!

It is not just about presenting a slideshow or winning a debate. It is not just for the confident few who put their hands up first in a classroom.

It is about being able to participate fully in life.

It shows up in the child who can explain perhaps to a doctor where it hurts. The teenager who can ask for help when they are struggling with big emotions. The young adult who can hold their own in a job interview, or when working hard alongside others on their apprenticeship.

These are not nice-to-haves. These are essentials. And every child deserves the chance to develop them.

Communication in our renewed framework

So let me turn to how our renewed framework supports this.

We published the framework in November last year, and it sets out how we inspect education, with a strong focus on pupils being prepared for their future and having the knowledge and skills they need for success.

Inspectors will be looking at whether early years settings place a strong emphasis on vocabulary, oral language and language comprehension. They want to see children developing a love of stories and songs. They want to see high-quality interactions between adults and children, like those we often find when shared reading takes place. They want to see staff proactively interacting with those who need it most.

In schools, inspectors will be looking at whether all pupils secure strong foundations in their speech, writing and communication.

They will be looking at whether the curriculum is designed to extend pupils' language and vocabulary. And they will want to see that all pupils are taught how to communicate effectively through spoken language, articulate ideas, and to engage with others through speaking and listening.

It means pupils being given the space – but also being explicitly taught how – to discuss and debate ideas in a considered way. To engage with differing views, beliefs and opinions.

This, in particular, is about laying the foundations for active and engaged citizenship.

It is about helping us as a wider society to argue well. Not arguing loudly or with the aim of winning at all costs, but instead listening. Bringing informed opinions and rigour to your arguments. Being willing to change your mind when the evidence demands it.

We are not looking to see a whole generation agreeing with each other in the classroom. And we are certainly not looking for children to all think in exactly the same way.

But we do want to see them learn to interrogate their own opinions. To navigate difference in a way that is thoughtful, respectful and truthful.

It feeds into their personal relationships. Into conversations online, where the temptation to shout rather than listen can be overwhelming. And of course, into the world of work, where collaboration and communication are essential.

Learning to socialise and how to get on. Learning to raise concerns and navigate disagreements. Learning to listen well. These are not soft skills. They are essential skills. And our framework recognises that.

Report cards

Now, I want to touch on how we communicate all of this back to settings, providers, schools, parents, and to the wider system.

Inspection is about more than judgement: it's about information. Our changes offer a clearer, more rounded picture to help schools and settings understand what they are doing well and where they need to improve. And the changes are helping parents understand what is happening in their child's education, so they can make informed choices that are right for their child.

That is why we have moved to our new report cards.

We have done away with single-word judgements. There is no more 'good'. No more 'outstanding'.

These new report cards use a 5-point scale. We now have 'urgent improvement', 'needs attention', 'expected standard' in the middle as the starting point for inspection, 'strong standard', and finally, 'exceptional', representing the very best practice in the whole of England.

And I want to be clear - there is no read-across from the old grades to the new. This is a fresh start, with more differentiation and more detail.

We assign grades to the areas that we were told matter most: areas like attendance and behaviour, curriculum and teaching, and achievement.

In those latter 2 - curriculum and teaching, and achievement - we have a whole section on 'strong foundations' to emphasise the importance of communication and language and reading at every age.

Another evaluation area that I am particularly excited about is inclusion.

We will look at whether all pupils get the support they need to enable future success - whether they're a young carer or known to the care system themselves or have SEND.

Checking whether inclusion is being done well means we're looking at whether barriers to learning

are being identified and addressed quickly - including barriers that some children might face in communicating effectively.

Because we know that some children arrive at school with a language gap that, if left unaddressed, will only widen. We know that children with speech, language and communication needs can struggle to access the fuller curriculum if their needs are not met.

Our research on Strong foundations in the first years of school found that children with the lowest starting points for their communication and language - those who need the most interactions with adults - often get the least.

It exacerbates their disadvantage. It's not intentional, but it's just easier for adults to interact with the chattier children. Adults need to be proactive about knowing who these children with the lowest starting points are and making sure they get the quality and quantity of interactions they need to learn what their peers already know.

Giving inclusion its own evaluation area is our commitment to ensuring all children have the chance to thrive. And splitting our evaluation out across these areas gives a fairer, fuller picture.

Because a school or setting might be achieving highly in some areas and less so in others. That is completely normal - for example, your leadership might be hitting the strong standard, while your inclusion efforts like I've talked about today might need more work.

But that's why we have the 'needs attention' grade. It's a chance to stop something becoming a bigger problem that impacts on the children in your care. And for good leaders, it shouldn't come as a surprise - it should be something they're already working on.

And for those schools that are graded 'exceptional' in any area, that is an extremely high bar. It is reserved for those whose practice is so strong that they should be helping to lead the system.

If you receive an exceptional grade, please do share that practice. Be a resource for others. Help others to get better. That is how we build a self-improving system that ensures better and better outcomes for children - which is the heart of why we exist.

Wrap-up

I started by talking about a child's first word. That moment when language moves from something heard to something spoken.

That moment does not happen by accident. It happens because someone invested in that child. Talked to them. Read to them. Listened to them.

And the work of everyone in this room is about making sure that investment continues through the early years, primary school, through secondary, and college and beyond.

Good interaction counts. Every opportunity to extend vocabulary, to model good communication, to teach children how to listen and how to speak - it all adds up.

Our renewed framework is designed to support your work. To set clear expectations and to hold schools and settings to account. And we will continue to celebrate those who are getting it right.

Because good communication is not a luxury or an optional extra, or something reserved only for an eloquent few. It is the foundation for learning, for citizenship, for life.

Thank you for everything you do. I'm happy to take questions.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/martyn-olivers-speech-at-voice-21s-speaking-summit-2026>