

The Better Start Literacy Approach: Improves both word decoding and language comprehension

Briefing Report: October 8th 2026

Key Messages

- The Better Start Literacy Approach (BSLA) was developed by leading researchers at the University of Canterbury specifically for our New Zealand education context.
- BSLA helps children develop the skills to read words and the language skills to understand what they read. Both are essential for becoming a successful reader.
- BSLA teaches more than phonics. Alongside teaching children how to recognise sounds, decode words and spell, BSLA explicitly develops children's vocabulary, listening comprehension, oral language and storytelling skills. In the upper primary school years there is a strong focus within BSLA teaching on improving students' reading comprehension and writing skills.
- The UC's research team have demonstrated that children aged 5- 6years, receiving BSLA teaching show measurable improvements in listening comprehension and oral storytelling skills in addition to accelerated growth in word decoding and spelling skills.
- BSLA supports children from diverse backgrounds. Research shows that improvements in word decoding, spelling, listening comprehension and oral storytelling are evident across school communities with different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Purpose: To summarise evidence that the Better Start Literacy Approach (BSLA) develops students' foundational skills in areas that support both word decoding ability and language comprehension.

Background: The Better Start Literacy Approach (BSLA) is an evidence-based classroom literacy approach, developed by Professor Gail Gillon and Professor Brigid McNeill from the University of Canterbury. The BSLA has several unique features: it is our first culturally responsive structured literacy approach specifically designed for our New Zealand education context; it has proven to be effective within controlled research trials implemented in our New Zealand schools; it incorporates a novel online assessment platform that integrates latest technological advancement in the recognition of 5-year-old children's speech; and, it provides high quality professional learning and development (PLD) for teachers throughout the country.

National Implementation: As a result of the initial successful research trials, the Ministry of Education funded a national rollout of the BSLA across Year 0-3 classrooms that commenced in 2021. Starting in 2025, the BSLA expanded to Years 4-8 and the BSLA team is currently a structured literacy provider for literacy teaching Year 0-8 classrooms. BSLA is also designed to support students with high and complex learning needs and all specialist schools are involved in BSLA implementation.

In the early school years, the focus in BSLA is on foundational literacy skills (phonics, vocabulary story-telling, listening comprehension, phoneme awareness, word decoding, and spelling). Teaching

for students in years 4- 8 focuses on advanced comprehensive literacy skills including explicit teaching in reading comprehension and writing processes. BSLA teaching is directly aligned to the New Zealand English Curriculum.

To date, there have been more than **204,000 students**¹ involved with the BSLA as part of this rollout. These students are from **1,174** schools across all regions of New Zealand. Over 18,000 teachers and educators have successfully completed BSLA Professional Learning and Development.

Key Findings

Published New Zealand evidence shows measurable gains in students' listening comprehension and oral storytelling within 30 weeks of BSLA teaching, with comparable growth across socioeconomic groups. These gains in listening and oral language skills are in addition to accelerated gains in phonic phoneme awareness, word decoding and spelling skills. Our latest findings (under publication review process) also show a modest listening comprehension advantage for children who received BSLA in their first year at school.

Published evidence shows growth within the first school year. A 2024 study (Gillon et al.) examined oral language progress in 1,518 children assessed at school entry and after 30 weeks. Listening comprehension improved significantly ($F(1,1399) = 31.71, p < .001$; Cohen's $d = 0.29$). Children's story retells also developed: the mean length of their utterance when re-telling a story significantly increased ($d = 0.54$), alongside the total number of words and number of different words used in their story retell (both $d = 0.29$; all $p < .001$)¹. Indicating significant growth in vocabulary knowledge.

Growth extends across socioeconomic groups. In the 2024 published study, listening comprehension and oral narrative growth were comparable between higher- and lower-deprivation school communities (all interaction effects partial $\eta^2 < .0060$ indicating the approach is working across diverse communities).

New comparative evidence supports a comprehension benefit. Recent analyses (under review) compared Year 2 children with and without prior BSLA teaching, (controlling for demographic characteristics). Children who received BSLA in Year 1 scored higher on all foundation literacy measures than children of the same age who received other types of literacy teaching in Year 1. This improvement included a modest but meaningful difference for listening comprehension skills ($d = 0.23$)²

BSLA Helps children to catch up to their peers

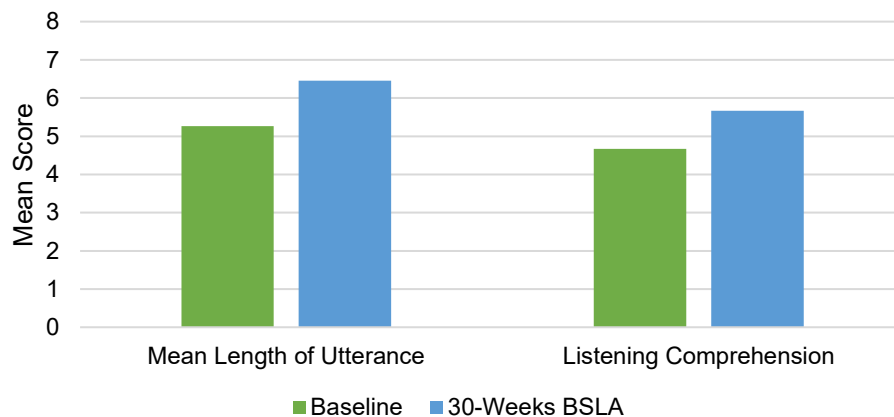
Additional published data shows that more targeted BSLA teaching (small group intervention) helps children with reading difficulties catch up. Published data of 1,265 5-year-olds show that children who receive this additional BSLA teaching support perform better than peers with a similar reading level who do not. (McNeill & Gillon, 2025).³

Early success predicts later reading and spelling outcomes

A further national evaluation supports BSLA's reading and spelling benefits. Analyses following 4,796 children who began BSLA at school entry found that early growth in phonics and phoneme awareness predicted later reading and spelling success. Predictive modelling indicated a significantly higher probability of reading and spelling success with BSLA than with standard teaching (Gath et al., 2025).⁴

¹ Data provided in this paper are current as at 23/09/2026

Figure 1. Mean scores on mean length of utterance and listening comprehension before BSLA and after 30 weeks of BSLA



Conclusions: These findings support BSLA’s contribution to the language foundations of reading comprehension. In addition to benefits for children’s development of phonological awareness, word decoding and spelling skills, the BSLA contributes to the development of listening comprehension and oral language skills.

Sources

- [1] Gillon, G., McNeill, B., Scott, A., Gath, M., Macfarlane, A., & Taleni, T. (2024). Large scale implementation of effective early literacy instruction. *Frontiers in Education*, 9, 1354182. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1354182>
- [2] Gillon, G., Gath, M., Milne, B., & McNeill, B. (manuscript in preparation). Early decoding differences and later reading achievement: Modelling the potential long-term implications of the Better Start Literacy Approach.
- [3] McNeill, B., & Gillon, G. (2025). The impact of a national implementation of tier 2 structured literacy teaching for children in their first year at school. *Topics in Language Disorders*, 45(2), 94-111. <https://doi.org/10.1097/TLD.0000000000000362>
- [4] Gath, M., Gillon, G., McNeill, B., & Scott, A. (2025). Evaluating the large-scale implementation of structured literacy teaching in New Zealand: Evidence from the Better Start Literacy Approach. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 129, 102510. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2024.102510>

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