



Education brief: Oracy

Oracy refers to the skills involved in using spoken language to communicate effectively.

What is oracy?

The term 'oracy' was first used by a British professor of education, Andrew Wilkinson, in the 1960s to emphasise the educational importance of spoken language skills; he wished to put them on a par with literacy (reading and writing) skills (Wilkinson, 1965). Wilkinson defined oracy as 'the ability to use the oral skills of speaking and listening'.

In recent years, the term has come to be used more widely and internationally, reflecting a growing awareness of the importance of developing young people's spoken language skills for their own futures and those of their communities. Moreover, recent educational research has shown that the effective use by teachers of talk in the classroom – in terms of vocabulary, tone, etiquette and so on – can have a strong impact on their students' educational attainment. It has therefore been argued that oracy should be made part of the normal, mainstream school curriculum in all countries (English-Speaking Union, 2016).

Although cultural norms regarding politeness and the appropriate forms of language to use in different social settings may vary, the essential skills underpinning oracy are not specific to any language or culture. For example, the same key principles underpin how to make an effective spoken presentation to an audience, or use talk to work well in a group or team.

What does research tell us about oracy?

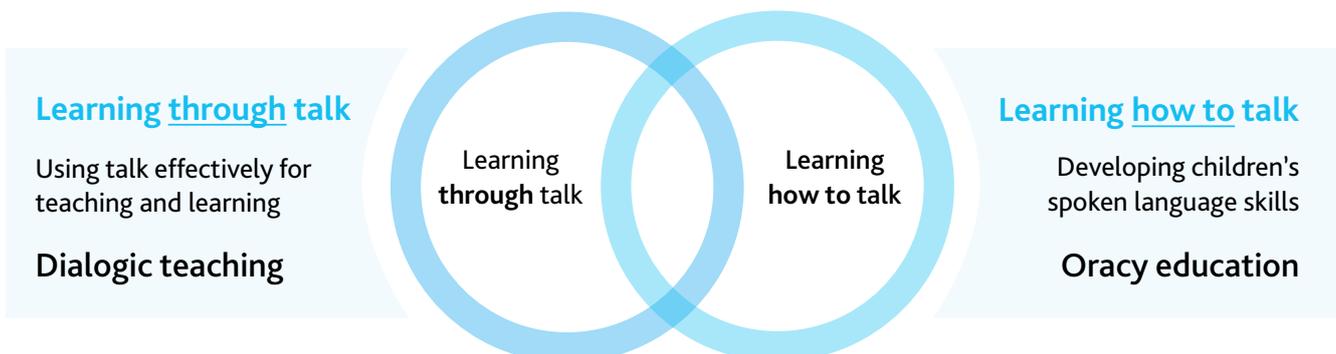
In recent years, researchers in developmental psychology, linguistics and education have emphasised the importance of talk in children's cognitive and social development (Whitebread et al. (Eds.), 2013). This idea was first expressed by the Russian psychologist Vygotsky, who recognised the central importance of language and interpersonal communication for cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978) and it has since been developed by other researchers (Daniels, 2001). Research from neuroscience and evolutionary psychology now supports the view that language has evolved as an integrated component of human cognition, rather than as a separate and distinct capacity (Mercer, 2013).

Humans have a great capacity for learning and, uniquely, a special capacity for learning language: which in turn enables us to learn from, and with, other people. By acquiring language, we become able to not just interact, but to interthink (Littleton & Mercer, 2013). That is, we are able to think not only as individuals, but in collaboration with other people. In this way, humans have (for better or worse) transformed the world.

However, young people depend on interaction with others for the development of their communication and thinking skills. Most will need the help of their teachers to become effective speakers and listeners. Through educational research, we now know some very practical ways that teachers can provide the relevant guidance and instruction.

Two aspects of oracy: dialogic teaching and oracy education

It is useful to think of oracy having two aspects. The first essentially concerns a teacher's effective use of talk in the classroom to enable the interactive process of teaching and learning. This is called **dialogic teaching**. The second concerns the explicit teaching of spoken language skills to students: helping them learn how to talk. This is called **oracy education**.



Why should teachers pursue dialogic teaching?

Recent large-scale school-based research has shown that students' educational attainment is most effectively promoted by dialogic teaching (Alexander, 2020; Howe et al., 2019; Mercer, Wegerif & Major (Eds.), 2019). This means that for at least some of the time, students need to be actively involved in dialogue with their teacher (and other students) about the curriculum they are studying.

In particular, it seems important that teachers achieve a strategic balance between two ways of using talk:



1. Authoritative Presentation, in which the teacher:

- does most of the talking
- informs students about a subject through a prepared talk or lecture
- instructs students on how to carry out some task or procedure
- provides a demonstration of a phenomenon or procedure
- checks students' knowledge through specific questions about subject content

and

2. Interactive Dialogue, in which the teacher:

- talks less
- gives students opportunities to take long turns when talking
- encourages students to discuss and question each other's ideas
- avoids always judging students' contributions as either 'right' or 'wrong'
- encourages students to ask questions about things they do not understand
- encourages students to share their thoughts and reveal misunderstandings
- expects students to justify their ideas with reasons.

Why should schools provide oracy education?

The out-of-school communicative experience of children varies enormously. Some may be regularly involved in thoughtful conversations, discussions, word play and other kinds of spoken interactions, while others' involvement in talk may be much more limited.

The quality of children's early language experience has been shown to be a powerful predictor of their subsequent educational achievement across the curriculum, not just in those subjects most closely related to language (Law et al., 2017; Roy, Chiatt & Dodd, 2014).

For many children, school may provide the only opportunities to develop a full, rich repertoire of spoken language skills. This is why many researchers and teachers now believe oracy education – the explicit teaching of spoken language skills – should constitute a significant part of every child's educational experience.

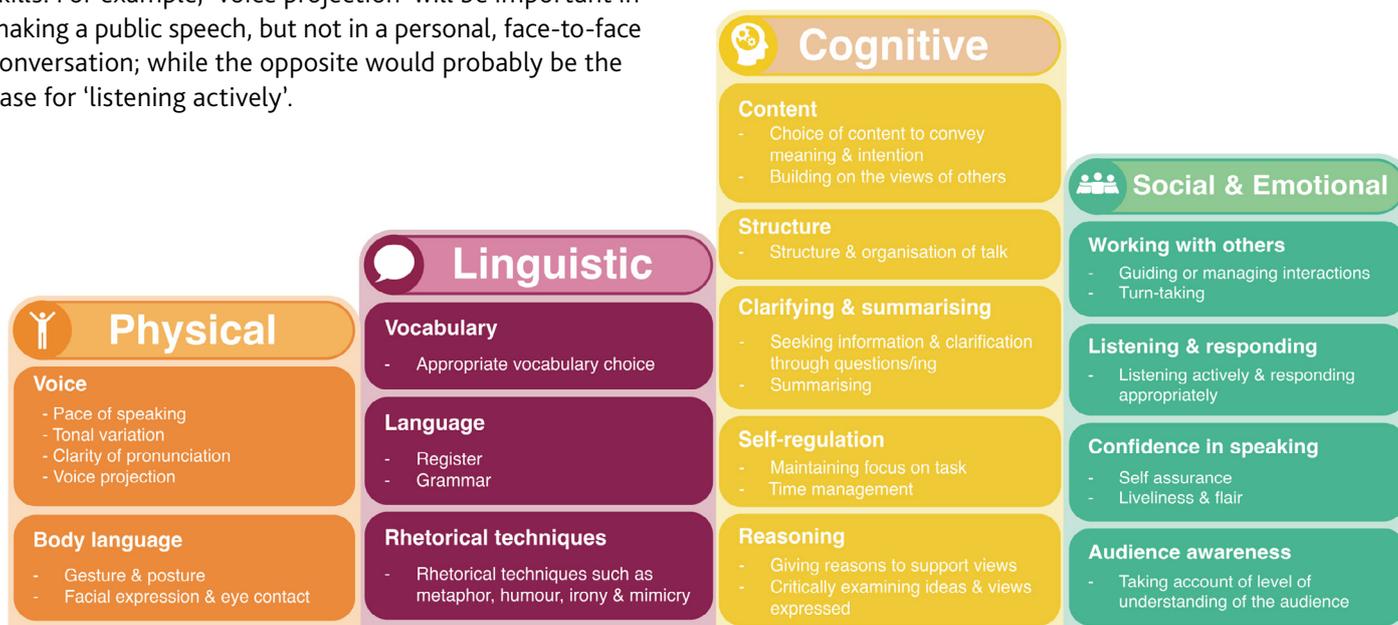


The Oracy Skills Framework

Until recent times, there was no clear specification of the range of skills that are involved in using spoken language to communicate effectively. The Oracy Skills Framework (as shown below and available online) was therefore created by researchers at the University of Cambridge, working with members of School 21 (the first UK school to put oracy firmly into its curriculum).

Specific types of talk situation require different sets of skills. For example, 'voice projection' will be important in making a public speech, but not in a personal, face-to-face conversation; while the opposite would probably be the case for 'listening actively'.

Source: <https://oracycambridge.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/The-Oracy-Skills-Framework-and-Glossary.pdf>



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Practical tips: how can schools promote oracy?

Teaching talk skills for group work and collaborative learning

So how can teachers develop students' skills in using talk for collaborative problem solving? There are six crucial steps in this process:

Step 1: Use a whole-class discussion to raise students' awareness of how they talk and work together.

Step 2: Ask students to say what they think makes a good – and bad – discussion.

Step 3: Pick out the most important features of a good discussion.

Step 4: Convert these into a set of 'ground rules' for carrying out effective discussions, which they should agree to adopt.

Step 5: Give them some well-designed groupwork tasks.

Step 6: With students, review their activity at the end of each week, focusing on the quality of their discussion.

The key features of a productive discussion are embodied in the concept of Exploratory Talk (Mercer, 2000); and it is this way of using language for thinking collectively that the students should be adopting. In Exploratory Talk, participants:

- all actively participate
- share relevant information
- engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas
- give reasons for their views
- check understanding by asking questions
- build on each other's responses
- strive for agreement.

Teaching presentational skills

Innovative schools that have prioritised oracy education, such as School 21 in the UK, have used an approach that is essentially based on the following six steps (Gaunt & Stott, 2018):

Step 1: Set up a safe setting for learning, such as a small group of students who will learn together.

Step 2: Ask each student to choose a subject they feel confident with. (Keep to simple topics: suggest one if necessary.)

Step 3: Ask each student to prepare a two-minute presentation. (NB not a script: students can only have a list of key words as prompts.)

Step 4: Get them to work on their ideas with a classmate.

Step 5: Ask each student to present in turn.

Step 6: Build up their confidence with critical but supportive feedback (which might usefully make reference to the *Oracy Skills Framework*).

This process is then repeated, with students preparing longer and more adventurous presentations, until they feel confident to speak to larger and less familiar audiences.

Teaching debating skills

Another way for students to develop their skills and confidence in public speaking is to involve them in debates. These are formal discussions, in which individuals or teams argue for or against a specific proposition. Some organisations, such as the English-Speaking Union (ESU), provide guidance for schools on doing this and also organise international debating competitions (see link to the ESU in 'Oracy resources online' below).

Teaching listening skills

Listening is key to learning, yet although it is mentioned often in classrooms – children are constantly reminded to listen – it is rarely taught as an achievable set of skills. Teaching listening involves making explicit some strategies that precede listening comprehension. It is helpful to do the following:

- Ask students to say what helps them to listen, and what makes listening difficult.
- Offer them listening activities designed to focus their attention for increasing amounts of time, or on increasingly complex ideas.
- After these activities, discuss what impact these are having with students, encouraging them to see themselves as increasingly able to listen to a range of things in a variety of environments.

Unsurprisingly, the use of authentic listening activities seems to lead to greater improvement in listening comprehension than if artificial tasks are used. You can find examples of listening activities and more information at: Waterford.org and Oracy Cambridge.

At the school level

If you are planning to give more attention to oracy in your school, it will be important to consider the following:

- Do all teachers have a clear, shared view of what 'oracy' means?
- What oracy skills are you hoping that students will develop?
- How aware are you of students' current levels of ability?
- How will you know if they are becoming more proficient or not?
- What activities will teachers use to develop and practise these skills?
- How aware are teachers of the principles of dialogic teaching?
- How will the oracy curriculum content for different year groups be related?
- How will you assess progress?

How is Cambridge International supporting oracy?

- Training such as our Enrichment workshop on Effective Talk and Questioning provides the opportunity for teachers to develop these practices further. We also offer training on complementary areas such as active learning, assessment for learning and metacognition.
- The Cambridge Primary and Lower Secondary English programmes integrate a speaking and listening strand that focuses on developing oracy skills. For example, communicating information clearly to a range of audiences and contexts, and being reflective about the role of talk. Similarly, the Cambridge IGCSE First Language English syllabus continues to support students' progression to oracy skills. For example, the ability to express thoughts and present ideas and opinions fluently, and to listen and respond appropriately in conversation.
- The Cambridge Global Perspective programmes are designed to develop students' communication and oracy skills through activities that promote dialogue and exploratory and reflective talk, expressing opinions and evaluating arguments.
- Our online resources provide teachers with a theoretical understanding of oracy and how they can support their students to develop oracy skills in the classroom. Here is a selection of resources from across Cambridge University Press & Assessment:
 - Blog on how teachers can develop their students' speaking skills. <https://blog.cambridgeinternational.org/how-teachers-can-develop-their-students-speaking-skills>
 - World of Better Learning: Oracy in the ELT classroom. This site provides links to a range of Cambridge resources on oracy: www.cambridge.org/elt/blog/campaign_page/oracy-elt-classroom

Education brief: Oracy continued

- **Cambridge Primary Path.** Cambridge Primary Path is an English language and literacy course that will help young learners become articulate speakers of English. www.cambridge.org/gb/cambridgeenglish/catalog/primary/cambridge-primary-path/product-details/oracy
- **What is Oracy?** This is a link to a set of videos in which researchers, teachers and students discuss oracy and illustrate how it can be integrated into primary school lessons. www.youtube.com/watch?v=DGQByIxTlzl

Where can you find more information?

Alexander, R. (2020). *A Dialogic Teaching Companion*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Roy, P., Chiat, S., Dodd, B. (2014). *Language and Socioeconomic Disadvantage: From Research to Practice*. London, UK. City University London.

Daniels, H. (2001). *Vygotsky and Pedagogy*. Abingdon: Routledge.

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Howe, C., Hennessy, S., Mercer, N., Vrikki, M. & Wheatley, L. (2019). Teacher-student dialogue during classroom teaching: Does it really impact upon student outcomes? *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 28(4–5), 462–512.

Law, J., Charlton, J., Dockrell, M., Gasgoigne, M., McKean, C., Theakston, A. (2017). *Early Language Development: Needs, provision, and intervention for preschool children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds*. A Report for the Education Endowment Foundation.

Littleton, K. & Mercer, N. (2013). *Interthinking: putting talk to work*. London: Routledge.

Mercer, N. (2013). The Social Brain, Language, and Goal-Directed Collective Thinking: a social conception of cognition and its implications for understanding how we think, teach, and learn. *Educational Psychologist*, 48(3), 148–168. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2013.804394>

Mercer, N., Wegerif, R. & Major, L. (Eds.) (2019). *The Routledge International Handbook of Research on Dialogic Education*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Mercer, N. (2000). *Words and Minds: How We Use Language to Think Together*. London: Routledge.

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Vygotsky, L. (1962). *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

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Wilkinson, A. (1965). *The concept of Oracy*. *Educational Review*, 17:4, 11-15, DOI: 10.1080/0013191770170401a.

Whitebread, D., Mercer, N., Howe, C. & Tolmie, A. (Eds.) (2013). Self-regulation and dialogue in primary classrooms. *British Journal of Educational Psychology Monograph Series II: Psychological Aspects of Education – Current Trends*, No. 10. Leicester: BPS.

Oracy resources online

Oracy Cambridge. A centre at the University of Cambridge that provides resources, support, links and blogs on oracy for teachers and schools internationally.

<https://oracycambridge.org>

For listening skills, see in particular

<https://oracycambridge.org/how-difficult-to-listen/>

Voice 21. The UK's leading oracy education charity, which provides resources and support for schools and teachers throughout the UK and abroad: <https://voice21.org>

The English-Speaking Union. An international organisation that promotes the development of young people's spoken language skills, offers resources and organises speaking competitions: www.esu.org

Debate Mate. A programme and resource for schools to help establish and run debating clubs and societies. Operates internationally. <https://debatemate.org>

The Oracy Skills Framework and Glossary.

Describes all the skills involved in spoken language use. <https://oracycambridge.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/The-Oracy-Skills-Framework-and-Glossary.pdf>

Waterford.org. This American charity provides guidance and resources on teaching listening skills. www.waterford.org/education/active-listening-in-the-classroom.

Learn more! To see other Education Briefs, go to www.cambridgeinternational.org/education-briefs

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