

Oracy
Education
Commission

Speaking Volumes

September 2024



The Commission on the Future of Oracy Education in England is hosted by Voice 21 in partnership with Impetus

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Speaking Volumes

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In March this year we launched the Commission on the Future of Oracy Education in England.

This independent Commission was formed to respond to a growing recognition of the importance of spoken language on children's learning and their life beyond school.

It's been a busy few months. Since the launch of the Commission, we have considered over 130 submissions of evidence, held meetings with an esteemed panel of Commissioners from across education, civil society, academia, business and cultural institutions. We've held expert roundtables on different aspects of oracy education such as expressive arts, GCSE English Language, assessment, inclusion and teacher development. And I've been exploring what oracy is and why it matters through a series of more than forty brief podcast conversations with a range of key commentators from within education and beyond.

To deepen our thinking, we have also commissioned a series of exploratory papers outlining key areas of discussion on particular issues related to oracy education. These papers have been written by experts in different fields of education who have kindly lent their time and expertise to the Commission. Each paper provides an overview of lines of discussion and key dilemmas relating to a particular area of enquiry, finishing with a provocation for the Commission to consider. Ahead of the publication of the Commission's final report and recommendations next month, we share these discussion papers with you in the spirit of open dialogue and debate, to let you see some of 'our workings' as it were.

The issues we have chosen to explore in this journal include those which address what oracy is and how it should be developed at school, as well as those about implementation – that is, what teachers need to learn about oracy, how and if it should feature in the English Language GCSE, and what needs to be done to ensure oracy education is inclusive for children and young people with communication differences.

As you read these papers, we would encourage you to discuss the provocations posed by the authors and to consider some of the questions we have been working through as a Commission. That's in the spirit of our ongoing mantra that "Everybody's talking about oracy!"

We will publish our final report later this month and I look forward very much to continuing the conversation with you then and beyond.

Geoff Barton
Chair, Commission on
the Future of Oracy
Education in England



What is oracy?

Exploring learning to and through talk

Dr Rupert Knight University of Nottingham

People are talking about oracy again. That's good. However, if this interest is to translate into sustainable impact, we need clarity about the concept. For some teachers, weary at the prospect of another new initiative, the response may be, 'Now what?'. While others perhaps perceive a re-branding of something they have always done and wonder, 'So what?'. For many, the question may simply be 'What?', as differing interpretations of oracy collide in online spaces. All these questions are reasonable and need answering. In this brief paper, I set out to piece together what oracy as a rich concept might mean by highlighting what I see as four essential hallmarks.

An interest in spoken language in education goes back millennia to the ancient world, but oracy as a term was coined by [Andrew Wilkinson in 1965 to describe 'general ability in the oral skills'](#). This naming was an attempt to position spoken language alongside numeracy and literacy with its own terminology and as an essential quality of an educated person. Wilkinson's rationale for this initiative gives us our first distinguishing hallmark. Oracy is about highlighting spoken language as something of value and status in its own right. Why is status important? For one thing, it helps to elevate purposeful speech above its now-notorious ministerial characterisation as 'idle chatter'. For another, it reminds us that [spoken and written language have important differences in form and function](#). Talk is not merely the prelude to, or something that should mimic, a written 'main event'.

Wilkinson's early focus on skills resonates with oracy as learning to talk, reflected, for example, in [Oracy Cambridge's emphasis on being a 'confident communicator'](#). It would be reasonable to imagine that this is an ambition

already accounted for in curricular terms as Speaking and Listening or Spoken Language. What oracy suggests, however, is not just a greater attention to talk as a facet of all subjects, but, crucially, an explicitness about that attention. This explicitness and analysis of spoken language might be enacted in teachers' modelling, their planning for specific oracy teaching points and the meta-talk and shared understanding supported by resources like the four strands of the [Oracy Framework](#). Such explicit teaching, however, raises a dilemma concerning the criteria guiding these actions. [It is important to stop and question the assumptions, values and cultural norms underpinning not just notions of 'standard English', but also standardised ways of interacting and contributing more generally. On whose terms are we teaching students to communicate?](#)

Part of the response to this difficult question lies in seeing oracy not as the arbitrary teaching of skills as a checklist – or content in search of a context – but as talk with someone and about something. Even the most presentational monologues presuppose an audience and a purpose. And here we have our third hallmark: oracy involves students developing linguistic judgement. Judgments about content, tone and delivery need to be rooted in learning to understand the appropriate ways to communicate for a given occasion, purpose and audience. Any evaluation of proficiency in talk, therefore, depends on the context in question. This means that a resource like the Oracy Framework is not a checklist to be worked through, but rather a collection of facets of talk to be drawn on as the situation demands. In this vision, diverse dialects and modes of communication, including the informal, have their places as part of learning to talk in various contexts.

This question of context has another dimension, since planned-for contexts for talk in school are often contrived as a means of learning: hence, learning through talk as another aspect of oracy. [This broader view of oracy was adopted some decades ago in the National Oracy Project](#) and is reflected currently in [Voice 21's Venn diagram](#). Including talk for learning in definitions of oracy might signal an interest in [dialogic approaches to learning, such as those outlined by Robin Alexander](#). However, in an educational landscape that is all too often binary and reductive, we should be clear that learning through talk does not necessarily imply a student-centred ideology, or indeed any particular form of pedagogy. All kinds of interaction, from structured teacher-led discussion to extended exploratory group work, can be improved through attention to points already raised. If classroom practice therefore involves a broad, well-informed repertoire of talk modes, this brings us to a final essential feature of oracy: deliberateness about the use of talk as a strategy. By this, I mean the thoughtful identification and staging of spoken language opportunities for specific educational purposes. Knowing not just how, but

when and why to use a minute of paired talk, a brief episode of small-group exploration, or a whole lesson centred on formal debate (or, equally, teacher explanation and modelling) is at the heart of an oracy-influenced classroom.

So, perhaps the essence of oracy, seen holistically as both content and pedagogy and based on these four hallmarks, is as follows:

Talk which *has status and is valued in its own right, deliberately planned for and taught explicitly, through a range of meaningful contexts, purposes and opportunities which develop students' linguistic judgement in service of specific learning goals.*

Tempting as it is to end with this definition, I wonder whether if there is one more hallmark. Does oracy perhaps also involve a stance, signalling a commitment to student voice, participation and agency? This is a broader remit and ambition. If we accept that the purpose of school is not just about attainment, but also development in social and personal terms (e.g. [Biesta, 2015](#)), how far should we go, and how bold should we be, in promoting oracy as integral to these wider – but more contested – educational aims?

What do teachers need to learn about oracy?

Professor Julia Snell University of Leeds

In this piece, I outline three key ideas about oracy – or what we might simply call spoken language – that are worthy of attention in teacher professional learning. Underpinning all three is the understanding that oracy education is valuable to all young people in all schools; it should not be seen as an intervention targeted at working class and minoritized pupils, nor should the aim be to promote the language practices of a privileged group of speakers.

1. Spoken language is a tool for thinking and learning

Schools under pressure to raise scores on standardised assessments may feel that they cannot devote time to developing classroom talk, but good quality talk – what I, and others, call ‘dialogue’ – [can enhance children’s learning and raise achievement across the curriculum, including on standardised tests](#). Dialogue is talk that stimulates thinking, makes thinking public and helps children to develop and refine their thinking. To foster dialogue in the classroom, teachers need [a repertoire of talk moves](#) that help children to articulate and deepen their reasoning, orient and listen to one another, and build on or critique each other’s claims. However, harnessing the power of talk for learning requires more than a shift in interactional style; there must be a corresponding shift in perspective, from valuing a correctly stated “right answer” to valuing the thinking process. [Dialogue is thus a particular stance towards knowledge, one that is open to alternative perspectives and critique. Dialogue is also a relation, based on mutual respect, inclusivity and solidarity](#). In a dialogic classroom environment, virtually [all pupils participate](#). However, it is important that they can [elaborate their thinking using whatever language they find most comfortable](#). For many this will be their local dialect, and for most, it will involve hesitation, half-formed statements, and the

occasional use of “like” (as one pupil told me: [“Sometimes, you’ve got to, like, think”](#)). Dialogic teaching and learning requires a skilled teacher who is able to use their professional judgement to balance the different dimensions of dialogue – productive talk moves, robust but respectful critique, and relations of solidarity – from one classroom context to the next; there is [no “best practice” approach](#). These skills can be honed through guided reflection on video recordings of real classroom practice.

2. Variation in spoken language is a resource.

Competing with the proven benefits of dialogic talk are demands for teachers and pupils to speak in ways deemed to conform with “standard English”. Here, it is often assumed that there is a “correct” way to speak as well as write. [These ideas are institutionalised and reproduced in Ofsted reporting and other policy mechanisms](#). However, speech is always situated within specific contexts and interactions, and thus what counts as “good”, “standard” or “acceptable” spoken language will vary from one situation to the next, between different groups of speakers, and over time. This variation is a resource that we can exploit as we make choices in interaction. The National Curriculum emphasises that children should consider the distinction between formal and informal contexts when making choices about appropriate vocabulary and grammatical structures. [Research has shown that they do this, shifting towards more standardised language in more formal contexts, regardless of their social background or attainment level](#). But the meaning potential of spoken language extends far beyond notions of formality. [In my research at schools in Teesside, I found that nine-year-old children used their local dialect to fulfil specific functions in interaction, such as calling out a friend who has done something unfair while maintaining a sense of camaraderie in their playground game](#). They used these dialect forms alongside standardised alternatives, deciding when one or the other was most relevant. Their language choices were largely unconscious, but they were purposeful and meaningful. We all do this. Indeed, [even those whose language is most closely associated with standardised English \(such as the government minister who presided over changes to the 2014 National Curriculum\) sometimes find it useful to exploit the meaning potential of nonstandardised grammar](#). Understanding the impact of our language choices gives us control, enabling us not just to respond passively to shifts in formality but to use language actively in order to create the atmosphere in the room, mark a change in the nature of our relationship with others, and present ourselves in multiple different ways. Teachers can thus empower pupils by

helping them to explore their language choices and abilities and by engaging in dialogue with pupils about how their language repertoires draw on and relate to other languages and varieties (including standardised English).

3. Harnessing the educational potential of spoken language demands critical language awareness.

Children are socialised from a young age that there is only one “correct” or “best” way to speak (i.e. the standardised English associated with white upper- and middle-class speakers) and some may consequently have [internalised negative views about their own language](#) and abilities. Teachers can help them to overcome the negative consequences of this (such as lack of confidence, the belief that they are not “academic” or [“not good enough for college”](#)) by [including critical language awareness \(CLA\) as a core part of their language education](#). Through CLA, teachers and pupils understand that language is never neutral; it is saturated in relations of power and dominance and implicated in social inequalities. The idea of a spoken “standard” emerged around 200 years ago and was defined in relation to the speech of the highest classes in London and those who attended prestigious public schools. Because these were the most powerful people in society, their way of speaking became synonymous with the qualities typically associated with powerful people, such as intelligence and competence. But there is nothing inherently superior about this way of speaking. Unfortunately, these associations endure today, which is why standardised English and a Received Pronunciation accent tend to be valued more than other kinds of speech. However, this does not mean that replicating these ways of speaking is the route to power and upward social mobility. On the contrary, the more we promote standardised English in speech and devalue nonstandardised English, the more we reinforce the idea that speaking “correctly” means emulating the speech of white and economically privileged speakers. This will benefit white and economically privileged speakers much more than it will benefit the less privileged children that those working in education strive to support. [In addition, educational linguists in the US](#) have shown that the language of Black and minoritised students is routinely stigmatised for failing to adhere to standardised English, even where they use language considered “standard” when produced by privileged white speakers. This suggests that we should shift our attention away from speakers’ language use and towards listeners’ perceptions, considering how our beliefs about race, class, and other speaker characteristics influence what we hear. This is especially important in education, where [teachers’ perceptions of pupils can have an](#)

[impact on how they interact with them in the classroom](#) and thus can be a barrier to developing productive dialogue for all. [Classrooms can be a place not only to explore these issues but to think through what we can do about them](#) (though it is important to state that [teachers' work is just one part – albeit an important one – of what must be much wider efforts to dismantle linguistic injustices and inequalities](#)).

None of this means that we should not help children to develop their command of *written* standard English, which remains an important educational objective. But [there is no evidence that the policing of oral language will help children to conform to the conventions of written standardised English](#). Moreover, the [nonstandardised forms that are routinely problematised and corrected in speech occur relatively infrequently in pupils' writing, and some \(such as *ain't*\) do not occur at all](#).

I end with a provocation for the Commission: What support, resources and policy changes do teachers need to fulfil the potential of oracy education as outlined here? How can we create the safe space that teachers need to try out and develop these ways of teaching and learning? How can we ensure that the frameworks and criteria through which pupils, teachers and schools are evaluated help to cultivate an environment which embraces the importance of spoken language across the curriculum?

How can oracy be inclusive of children and young people with communication needs and differences?

Louisa Reeves Speech and Language UK

Caroline Wright Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists

The Oracy Education Commission sets out a bold vision – “towards an oracy entitlement for every child”. This focus on speech, language and communication presents a great opportunity but there are some vital considerations to ensure it is fully inclusive. But to what extent can – or should – that vision be delivered for children and young people with communication needs and differences?

Who are the children we're talking about?

While all children will benefit from teaching staff who understand how communication develops and what strategies support children's speech, language and communication skills throughout their time in school, some children will need more adapted approaches including interventions and in some cases specialist support.

Indeed there are many children who start school with lower language skills, and might benefit from some extra support in the classroom. A [survey of](#)

[teachers](#) by Speech and Language UK concluded that 1 in 5 children are currently behind in talking and understanding words.

The [latest figures from the Department for Education](#) show that 18.4% of children and young people in England have special educational needs (SEN). That's 1.6 million children, and equates to five or six children in every classroom of 30.

While not all of these children will have communication needs or communicate differently, many of them will. In fact, the most common type of need overall is speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). In 2023-24, almost 370,000 children had a primary need of SLCN. Within this group, many have developmental language disorder (DLD) – a condition which affects approximately 7.6% of children, and yet many people have never heard of it. This group of children have lifelong difficulties with understanding and using language, often these difficulties are overlooked or misdiagnosed with subsequent impact on children's potential for achievement as well as their behaviour and mental health.

Children with many of the other categories of need may also communicate differently or require some additional support, such as autistic children, deaf children, and those with learning disabilities.

There are also children with communication differences who are unlikely to be considered as having a special educational need – children who stammer for instance. According to Action for Stammering Children, around 8% of all children stammer at some point in their childhood.

So we are not talking about a small or niche issue, but a large group of children in the school population.

Does the term 'oracy' by definition exclude children who communicate through means other than spoken language?

The term 'oracy' itself is considered by some to be non-inclusive, perceived as giving spoken language primacy over the other forms of communication which children and young people use to articulate ideas, develop understanding, and engage with others.

Deaf children are one example. There are over 50,000 deaf children in UK – the majority of them will be accessing mainstream education and learning through spoken language. 9% have severe and profound deafness and access a mainstream curriculum through British Sign Language (BSL). For

those children, BSL is their first or preferred language through which they can express their ideas. Many deaf children are multilingual and bimodal, moving across languages and modes with great skill. Would we say to these children that being a competent communicator is only about speech?

Autistic children provide another example where there is a wide range of communication differences. While many autistic children and young people communicate effectively through spoken language, others are non-speaking or semi-speaking. These children and young people may communicate through written language or using alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) devices. Neurodivergent children and young people may also have different communication and interaction styles, for example preferring asynchronous communication (interactions that do not require an immediate response) or using direct language.

How can oracy education affirm and celebrate these differences in communication?

The risks of a non-inclusive approach to oracy education

Many working within the special educational needs and disabilities sector can provide examples where education policies have been developed and implemented without sufficient consideration for children and young people with SEND. They can also detail the ways in which these policies have had a negative impact on the education and wellbeing of those children, despite the fact they make up around 1 in 6 of our school population.

There is a risk then that a non-inclusive approach to oracy education could result in unintended harm to these same children and young people. Mainstream schools can already be a difficult environment for many children and young people – evident in the rising levels of school non-attendance. Some may be concerned that oracy education could make school even more anxiety-inducing for children with communication needs and difference.

Perhaps the answer is to exempt these children and young people from oracy activities. But in doing so we may be entrenching educational disadvantage. For example, Action for Stammering Children told us that children who stammer often avoid taking academic subjects and careers that put a focus on spoken language.

How can the Commission ensure that its proposals are inclusive by design, and do not result in a two-tier system for children with communication needs and differences?

The opportunities to celebrate and centre diverse communication

There is an opportunity for the oracy education of the future to support all children and young people to maximise their communication potential, by celebrating and promoting acceptance of all forms of communication, enabling every child to express ideas and engage with others, in whatever way works best for them. But it will not happen without bold thinking.

- What training do new and experienced teachers need about children’s speech, language and communication development, and how could this best be delivered?
- How could the curriculum support schools to be inclusive of all forms of communication?
- Which tools, training or resources do teachers need to be able to understand and monitor children’s speech, language and communication development?
- What would a truly inclusive oracy education look like?

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What is ‘disciplinary oracy’ and why does it matter?

Amanda Moorghen Voice 21

1. What is disciplinary oracy?

[‘Disciplinary oracy’ is the recognition that what it means to use oracy skills effectively varies between disciplines.](#) The oracy skills we use, teach and value in the science classroom differ to those used, taught and valued in the history classroom.

1.a. Through a theoretical lens

[The reason for this difference is that “each subject has its own unique language, ways of knowing, doing, and communicating”.](#) In other words, we do not define subject disciplines (maths; history; science etc.) through superficially different lists of facts. There are more profound epistemic differences: the subject disciplines offer different ways of knowing about the world; different ways of evaluating truth claims; different ways of establishing academic rigour¹.

These differences between subject disciplines matter for oracy because of the relationship between talking and thinking. It is through spoken language that we develop cognitively as thinkers; how we access new ideas, (disciplinary) modes of analysis, and conceptual understanding².

¹ This position draws in particular on the work of [Moore](#) and [Young](#).

² This has ancient roots across cultures, but the modern position can be understood as drawing from the work of Vygotsky (role of language in cognitive development) and less famously Bakhtin (dialogic imagination), to Mercer (thinking together), Alexander (dialogic teaching) and others today.

[This drives our understanding of the disciplinary nature of both literacy and oracy: neither is solely a generic, domain-neutral skill.](#) Rather, to become literate or to use oracy effectively is to be inducted into the ways of knowing, doing and communicating that pertain to the subject discipline at hand.

1.b. Through a practical lens

For teachers, ‘disciplinary oracy’ presents two provocations:

First, to consider which aspects of oracy remain the same across subjects; and which differ. For example, schools will often have consistent routines around structures for talk (what does ‘partner talk’ look like at this school?). These can be implemented at a whole-school level, rather than each subject department re-inventing the wheel. On the other hand, each department is likely to have differing expectations around what constitutes high-quality talk within that structure. They will use different stimuli, scaffolds and success criteria for talk in order to promote the types of talk valued in that subject domain. The school’s leadership will attend to these similarities and differences to make the most of opportunities for consistency, whilst not imposing uniformity that prevents teachers from using oracy faithfully in support of their subject discipline.

Second, to recognise that speaking and listening is the tip of the iceberg of thinking and learning. We should value students’ ability to speak ‘like a specialist’ insofar as it indicates the development of subject-specific ways of thinking and knowing. This should underpin teachers’ decisions of how, when and why to support students in developing their linguistic repertoires, which might include anything from deploying technical vocabulary or constructing an argument within the logic of the subject discipline.

2. Why does disciplinary oracy matter?

2.a. In the development of ‘confident, active learners’

Voice 21 Oracy Schools frequently tell us that they want to develop ‘confident, active learners’. Let’s unpack this.

We analysed around 1000 student responses to our annual Oracy Surveys, to find out more about what students meant by ‘confidence’. We found that students mostly spoke about it in the sense of academic self-efficacy, i.e. their belief in their ability to complete tasks; their agency over their academic performance.

Disciplinary oracy is inextricably linked with students’ sense of confidence and agency over their academic performance. It makes explicit, through talk, the logics of the discipline. As a result, students are better able to evaluate their own performance, and less reliant on external validation. In their words: “It helps me understand what to do and how to learn without being stuck” (Year 5 student)

2.b. In the service of dialogic teaching

[There is robust research evidence that dialogic teaching promotes student attainment across English, Maths and Science.](#) Especially in a secondary context, this requires disciplinary oracy: dialogue as a genuine part of the learning process, not an add-on (e.g. authentic, extended discussion rooted in teachers’ understanding of the subject-specific thinking they are promoted; not just a quick bit of partner talk or asking students to do a presentation).

For dialogic teaching to be equitable, students have to be taught how to join in. In Voice 21 Oracy Schools, teachers remark on the ways in which clear expectations, structures and scaffolds (where needed) for talk mean that they are hearing from students that used to opt out. They notice the ways in which students listen more kindly and carefully, inviting others in and genuinely valuing their contributions. For schools and students at the start of their oracy journey, this can look formulaic, and the use of scaffolds may be clumsy. But on this foundation of participation, students’ expertise grows; the scaffolding falls away; and great oracy becomes an almost invisible part of a rich and challenging learning environment.

2.c. In the expansion of students’ linguistic repertoires

Within the classroom, [research suggests that ‘correcting’ students’ use of language can hinder learning through talk.](#) However, teachers are also often motivated by the possibility of using language to open new worlds for students. Disciplinary oracy helps us make sense of this. It suggests that in a classroom context, we may be concerned with the use of language insofar as it promotes or detracts from our central purpose, which is to induct students into the ways of talking (and thinking) of the discipline. For example, in a science classroom, using technical vocabulary accurately is important – and to pretend otherwise is to do students a disservice. On the other hand, scientists may still use non standard language features, especially whilst engaging in exploratory talk, if it serves the thinking of the group.

I would suggest that this teasing apart of purposes – language that connects us to knowledge (e.g. technical language) vs. language that connects us to power

(e.g. 'standard English') is especially important for marginalised speakers. Too often, students are offered the choice of identifying as scholars, as academics, only at the cost of abandoning the identity they hold outside of school. This is a false choice. Students should be shown how to hold the language of school alongside their own. Sometimes, this is about 'code switching' – speaking differently in different contexts. Other times, there are more complex choices to make: often we see great technical communicators blend the language of their discipline with humanising, non standard language features.

2.d. In the development of a professionalised generation

Whether a carpenter, a teacher or a doctor, there is something powerful about our ability as adults to feel autonomy at work, and pride in a job well done. There is something dehumanising about the sense that this is being stripped away, in the de-professionalising of whole communities through the loss of skilled working class jobs; and of teaching through the focus on 'quick fixes', scripts and interventions, and high external accountability.

An oracy-rich classroom can be a child's first professionalising experience. Disciplinary oracy teaches students the ways of talking and thinking that they need to understand and have agency over their learning. It offers ways of thinking that allow us to value the thing that is happening – to love science, history, maths – for what it is and not just for the grade it may or may not leave us with.

3. Provocations

3.a. Is 'disciplinary oracy' possible given the constraints schools face?

There is a recruitment and retention crisis in our schools. This has a disproportionate impact on students in the least well-resourced communities: ["9-in-10 leaders in the most disadvantaged schools said recruitment issues impact the quality of education they can provide."](#) As a result, students are increasingly taught by less experienced and non subject-specialist teachers.

In this context, some argue that 'disciplinary oracy' is a pipe-dream; that it requires experienced, subject-specialists to facilitate high-quality classroom talk. However, we can't simply retreat to the high ground. If disciplinary oracy can only be delivered by the most experienced teachers, students in disadvantaged communities will lose out.

Questions:

- How can we showcase not just 'best' practice but also 'good' practice, and attend to the journey between the two?
- How can we hold the complexity of (disciplinary) oracy without making it seem arcane and unrealistic?
- How can disciplinary oracy be made more accessible to teachers, at any stage of their career, including those teaching outside of their subject specialism? (E.g. through high-quality professional development and curricular resources)
- How can schools be best supported to deliver high-quality professional development for all teachers, including in regards to disciplinary oracy? (Thinking here about nurturing internal expertise, as well as external provision where needed)

3.b. What does disciplinary oracy look like in a silent classroom?

Schools have always had different values and visions, and taken different approaches to inclusion, teaching and learning. For some, oracy sits in opposition to other ways of organising thinking about teaching and learning – it seems paradoxical to be both an 'oracy school' and have 'silent classrooms', for example. There is quite limited information about schools the furthest from being a 'natural fit': to date, oracy has been practised in schools who have opted in, starting with the keenest schools.

This is a particular challenge for disciplinary oracy because, to be effective, it must be central to the school's approach to teaching and learning. It can't be delivered as an 'extra', in form time or co-curricular time, it must be a vehicle for delivering the curriculum. In other words, you can't deliver disciplinary oracy while side-stepping the question of connection to vision for teaching and learning.

Questions:

- How can we hold the complexity of disciplinary oracy, and avoid it being reduced to part of a 'culture war', positioned in opposition to e.g. direct instruction (rather than both being parts of a teacher's toolkit, to be developed as pedagogical expertise and deployed as needed) ?
- In what ways can oracy be promoted for schools, such that they are able to implement it in a way that is coherent with their values and vision for learning (i.e. sustainably & meaningfully), rather than grudgingly (for some) as a tick-box exercise?

What do we need to think about in relation to oracy in English Language GCSE?

Barbara Bleiman English & Media Centre

There are two English qualifications at 16, English Language and English Literature. They have a long and complicated history in terms of the function they perform in the English qualifications system, the relationship between the two, and also the use made of them in accountability measures to judge schools. There has always been overlap between them (with language being understandably assessed, at least in part, via literature) but the balance has shifted over many iterations of the subjects and over time. Equally, the ways in which language relates to the broader discipline of linguistics has always been less than clear, with a history of limited opportunities for students to show knowledge about language, as opposed to competence in using it. The rare exception to this was the introduction of an investigative Controlled Assessment task on 'Studying Spoken Language', first taught in 2010 and then soon abolished (last examined in 2016). This provided an excellent opportunity for students to learn about the nature of spoken language and be introduced to the discipline of linguistics in ways that made them more aware of the possibilities for further study in A Level English Language. It also had the important side-effect of developing teachers' own knowledge about language, via resources and CPD designed to cater for this element of the GCSE, and a backwash into KS3. Because it was assessed at GCSE, teachers felt that there was more of a legitimate preparatory role for it in Years 7-9.

Part of the complexity lies in the fact that English as a subject has always had so many elements and aspects – the study of literature in its own right,

the use of literature as a vehicle for the teaching of literacy, the teaching of writing, in particular creative writing, where again the literary terrain provides rich opportunities for developing writing competence and skill, the study of language. The GCSE (and previously O Level and CSE) have been used as a final summative evaluation of students' literacy, with a requirement for a particular level or grade to progress on to higher level qualifications and as a measure of aptitude for employment. The creative, affective, cultural, literary sit alongside the practical judgement of competency.

Spoken language was, up until 2014, one part of this judgement of language competency making up 20% of the GCSE English Language grade. However, in Summer 2014 this was changed, with a Speaking and Listening element (consisting of a presentation and question and answer session) no longer counting towards the final grade. Speaking and Listening still has to be assessed, as a compulsory element but is graded separately as Fail, Pass, Merit and Distinction. The reasons given were that the assessment wasn't sufficiently 'resilient', with teachers being too generous in their marking, and no practical arrangements considered capable of resolving this. This was at a point at which coursework was 40% of the GCSE grade and Speaking and Listening 20%, with final examinations 40% and the change led to a temporary period when exams counted for 60% and coursework (or Controlled Assessment as it became) 40%. Michael Gove abolished coursework altogether, taking effect for new GCSE cohorts in September 2015.

Despite Ofqual's assurances at the time that the changes to the assessment of Speaking and Listening would not impact on the way it was taught, with Glenys Stacey stating that they "do not imply any downgrading of speaking and listening skills," the reality has been that speaking and listening has been downgraded and is no longer taken as seriously. Anecdotal evidence suggests that schools find it a major administrative nuisance, do it in as time-efficient way as possible – the bare minimum to meet the official requirements – and students themselves view it in the same rather cynical, limited way.

Where should we go from here? Clearly, the whole structure of GCSE English subjects needs a re-think and a fresh vision, to re-examine the inter-relationships between the two and their shared and different purposes. Within that, regardless of the outcomes, speaking and listening needs to play a significant part. What that should be is open for discussion but here are some thoughts for consideration:

1. If an English Language qualification is to continue to assess competency in language then it must surely include the assessment of how well students speak and listen – not just in making a speech or responding in an interview but also in their ability to function well in groups – a key

aspect of every part of future adult life. How can this be achieved in ways that are robust and 'resilient' and also support these being developed in KS3?

2. With concerns about AI but equally a sense among some in the profession that the loss of all coursework has shrunk the English curriculum, is there a role for assessment not of speaking and listening but rather of other aspects of the subject via speaking and listening? Would there be scope for assessing a literary text, or an unseen poem, for instance through a spoken assessment? This could be offered as an option if it were considered to be logistically difficult for whole cohorts across the country.
3. Is there potential for re-introducing the Spoken Language Study in some form within English Language GCSE, given its popularity and the way in which it enriched students' experience and teachers' expertise? The extent and form would need to be considered as part of the thinking about how far English Language allies itself to the subject discipline of Linguistics, and how far it remains more a test of competence in language.
4. Should there be elements of GCSE that explore language in use, to reflect changing experiences and requirements for young people in today's world? For instance, should there be opportunities to study, develop critical understanding of and use spoken language in social media, the internet and the media more generally? 'Ephemeral' and 'multimedia' texts have been excised from GCSE but is there a case for re-introducing some element in a newly conceived GCSE? Should all students have the chance to study accents, dialects and sociolects, to develop their understanding of their own language and the place of English in a changing world?

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