The development of Oracy skills in school-aged learners

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Introduction

The term 'oracy' was coined by Wilkinson in the 1960s to emphasise the educational importance of spoken language skills, on a par with reading and writing skills; he defined oracy as 'the ability to use the oral skills of speaking and listening'[1]. The concept was championed in the UK by the National Oracy Project in the late 1980s, but fell into disuse when government priorities became focused narrowly on reading, writing and mathematics[2]. Elsewhere, it was kept alive by the foundation in 1969 of the Oracy Australia Association; but it never caught on in the USA and does not seem to have been translated into other world languages. However, the term is now being used more widely and internationally, reflecting a growing awareness of the educational and social importance of spoken language skills. For example, a 2017 meeting in Lisbon on 'Oracy in Global Classrooms' hosted by the English-Speaking Union was attended by representatives from twenty-two countries[3]. It remains the most succinct and precise term for referring to the skills involved in using talk to communicate effectively across a range of social contexts. We will use 'oracy education' to mean the direct, explicit teaching of those skills.

1 Wilkinson, 1965, p.13
2 Norman, 1992
3 ESU, 2017

Part 1: Why is oracy education important?

Two key reasons for a focus on oracy education are its impact on:

- Children's cognitive development and learning in school;

- Children's preparation for participation in the wider world.

In the early 20th century, the Russian psychologist Vygotsky[4] proposed that once a child has acquired language, their thinking is profoundly and irrevocably transformed. As shown in Figure 1, Vygotsky proposed that children's language learning and experience was linked to their cognitive development in a helical continuous process. We now have evidence to substantiate Vygotsky's hypothesis[5]. Through being involved in spoken dialogues from their earliest years, children learn how both the world, and language, work. They learn how other people make sense of the world, how language is used to reason about causes and effects, how emotions and identities are expressed, and how to work together to solve problems and get things done. Their learning of language is linked to the uses of language they witness as they are immersed in social situations. By listening, attending and contributing to ambient conversation, children take up the language of their social worlds, and are influenced by and influence those around them. Ways of talking shape ways of thinking, and ways of thinking are expressed in ways of talking. Conversely, for the child who is denied a rich language experience, poorly developed oracy skills mean that the chance to take an active part in learning is seriously diminished.
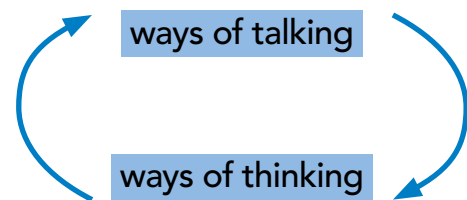

Figure 1. The Vygotskian relationship between language experience and cognitive development

Language shapes our individual thinking and is our prime tool for thinking collectively; we do not just use language to interact, we use it to 'interthink'[6]. That is, we share thoughts aloud and so influence others whilst their words influence us, and new shared understanding can be created in the process. But children are not born with language 'hard-wired' into their cognition. They have the capacity to learn language, but they still have to learn it. As with other human tools, they must learn through experience how to use language effectively – and they can be directly taught language skills. For the child entering school, much depends on what they have already experienced. It is rarely assumed that children will have picked up the skills of literacy – writing and reading are almost always taught; but it remains unusual for oracy to be taught explicitly. Yet 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[7]. Indeed, measures of simply the *amount* of talk young children are involved in is predictive of their success in school[8]. This effect probably concerns the uses of language for jointly constructing knowledge and understanding, as Vygotsky suggested. As represented

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4 Vygotsky, 1962, 1978
5 Mercer, 2013
6 Littleton & Mercer, 2013
7 Goswami & Bryant, 2007
8 Hart & Risley, 1995

in the 2016 publication *Speaking Frankly*[9], an increasing number of researchers and educators now argue that schools should offer children that crucial 'second chance' to acquire spoken language skills which they may not have acquired at home; skills which will help them to take up educational opportunities and which could transform their destinies. For that to happen, oracy must be part of the school curriculum. The educational implications of the case made in *Speaking Frankly* can be summarised as:

1. Governments and school managements need to understand oracy skills and their importance for the child, the school, and society generally;

2. There needs to be a commitment of time and resources in schools for oracy education;

3. Teachers need to be educated in the teaching, monitoring and assessment of spoken language skills;

4. Young people should be taught oracy skills explicitly and helped to become aware of the importance of using talk effectively for learning and getting things done.

Supporters of oracy education have also argued that it helps to prepare young people with a set of skills for life. Employers commonly report that members of their workforce, especially those engaged in creative activities, management and customer-related roles, need well-developed skills in spoken communication[10]; but they also regularly claim that school leavers lack those skills[11]. They want to employ people who can make clear presentations, work well in teams, listen properly to others and solve problems collaboratively. These are also the skills that equip young people for full participation in democratic processes and life in general.

Most of the recent arguments made in support of oracy education have focused on children's use of their first language, or at least on their use of the official language used in their schools; but as we will explain, oracy skills need not be considered language-specific, and can be pursued and developed in the second language classroom.

9 ESU, 2016
10 CBI, 2016
11 UKCES, 2010, p. 16

Part 2: The range of oracy skills

On the basis of research carried out at the University of Cambridge[12], it has been proposed that we can categorise oracy skills into four main categories:

1. Physical

This category concerns a speaker's use of voice and body language. For example, is the speaker's projection of voice appropriate for a given situation? Do they speak fluently? Do they modulate their tone of voice appropriately? In face-to-face encounters and public presentation, do they use gestures appropriately to enhance meaning?

2. Linguistic

This category is concerned with a speaker's choice of vocabulary, as well as the grammatical quality and structure of their talk. It also includes a speaker's use of rhetorical devices, such as metaphor, to enhance or clarify meaning.

3. Cognitive

This category concerns the content of talk, and its quality with regard to the task in hand. For example, does a speaker take account of the level of understanding of a listener? Do they use questions well to gain information from others? Do they use talk well to reason? In discussions, do they build upon the contributions of others?

4. Social & Emotional

This category concerns a speaker's use of language as a tool for building and maintaining social relations. For example, are they able to use talk to work collaboratively with others to solve problems? Do they show a sensitivity to the identities and personal situations of others in the way they ask or respond to questions? Do they demonstrate an ability to listen attentively to what others say?

These categories are set out in the Cambridge Oracy Skills Framework, Figure 2 overleaf.

12 Mercer, Warwick & Ahmed, 2017

Oracy skills

PHYSICAL 1. Voice 2. Body language	1. a) fluency and pace of speech; b) tonal variation; clarity of pronunciation; d) voice projection 2. a) gesture and posture; b) facial expression and eye contact
LINGUISTIC 3. Vocabulary 4. Language variation 5. Structure 6. Rhetorical techniques	3. appropriate vocabulary choice 4. a) register; b) grammar 5. structure and organisation of talk 6. rhetorical techniques, such as metaphor, humour, irony and mimicry
COGNITIVE 7. Content 8. Clarifying and summarising 9. Self-regulation 10. Reasoning 11. Audience awareness	7. a) choice of content to convey meaning and intention; b) building on the views of others 8. a) seeking information and clarification through questions; b) summarising 9. a) maintaining focus on task; b) time management 10. a) giving reasons to support views; b) critically examining ideas and views expressed 11. taking account of level of understanding of the audience
SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL 12. Working with others 13. Listening and responding 14. Confidence in speaking	12. a) guiding or managing the interactions; b) turn-taking 13. listening actively and responding appropriately 14. a) self-assurance; b) liveliness and flair

Figure 2. The Cambridge Oracy Skills Framework[13]

Part 3: Teaching oracy skills

Converting the types of skills listed in the Oracy Skills Framework (above) into teaching goals or learning intentions is, of course, a necessary and potentially demanding task. It can help if, for each category, a specific skill is identified and pursued in a lesson, or through a series of lessons. For example, in relation to the category 'Physical', a specific lesson could focus on 'voice projection in making a public presentation'; or, for the category 'Linguistic', using a rhetorical technique like a three-part list to present an argument. Under 'Cognitive', children's attention could be focused on how to give clear reasons to support their views and to evaluate reasons given by others. Under 'Social and Emotional', children could be helped to improve their listening skills through asking them to provide summaries of reports of events provided by other students.

In principle, an oracy curriculum could be constructed to cover all the specific skills in each category of the Oracy Skills Framework. In practice, teachers will have to be selective, focusing on those features which they judge that their students need most. It is important for both teachers and students to have a clear conception of which skills are being targeted to ensure progression, and to enable assessment. The teaching of a specific skill can proceed by introducing and explaining the skill, teaching how to use it by modelling examples and providing immersive experience in its use. Such oracy input should be followed by teacher-led discussions and peer evaluations of the use of the specific skill, and further evaluation as the skill is assimilated into practice.

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Evaluations by British school inspectors (OFSTED) of schools who have used such approaches suggest that they are beneficial. For example, in their 2018 report of the lead primary school in the Camden Oracy Project in London (a school which includes many students for whom English is a second language), the inspectors commented:

- Learning is focused on developing what pupils already know, identifying misconceptions and encouraging pupils to reflect on and engage in their own learning. Pupils are encouraged to think about the learning process and to decide on the right steps to improve their knowledge and skills.

- The school is successful in meeting a wide range of learning needs for pupils with developmental language delay. The school's strong focus on developing pupils' speaking skills is particularly successful in supporting language development.

- Writing is underpinned by speaking, and pupils are encouraged to use ambitious vocabulary in their speech and writing.

- Speaking is at the heart of all learning, and adults model ambitious vocabulary through play. Skillful questioning develops the children's thinking skills and encourages them to begin problem-solving. Children are encouraged to ask why things happen and to explain their thinking.

Similarly, OFSTED's 2018 report on the University of Cambridge Primary School noted:

- Pupils who speak English as an additional language and pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities make very good progress over time because of well-considered support. The strong focus on speaking and listening skills, alongside carefully targeted interventions, is very effective.

Both schools received an overall 'Outstanding' evaluation.

We will discuss the use of such talk-focused pedagogy in relation to two important domains: collaborative group work and public speaking, with a brief note on teaching the key skills of listening.

Teaching talk skills for group work and collaborative learning

Research on classroom-based group work reveals a paradox: it has shown that collaborative learning can be very effective for curriculum learning[14], but that simply putting children together to work in groups is often unproductive[15]. The paradox can be resolved in the realisation that children will only work well together if they have learned how to do so; and that is only likely to be the case if they have been taught the relevant oracy skills. Research has also shown that one of the strongest influences on how children talk during group work is the way their teacher talks with them[16].

Research has shown that collaborative learning can be very effective for curriculum learning, but that simply putting children together to work in groups is often unproductive.

So how can teachers develop children's skills in using talk for collaborative problem solving? There appear to be two crucial steps in this process. First, teachers must raise students' awareness of why they are being asked to work in groups, so that they appreciate the potential value of talk for learning; and secondly, teach them how to engage in the kind of reasoned discussion which is known as Exploratory Talk. This is a way of using language for thinking collectively or interthinking[17]. In the USA such educationally effective talk is known as Accountable Talk[18]. This kind of approach has been found to be effective with children as young as six years old[19]. For example, one head-teacher of a school in which this approach was used commented 'I think it seems to work across, for all children, I suppose – special needs children, EAL (English as an Additional Language) children, the more able children.'[20]

In Exploratory Talk everyone's viewpoint is considered, opinions are justified with reasons, and decisions are made together. People engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas. They invite one another to contribute, asking for explanation, reasons and elaboration. They listen and respond, continuing the discussion until their group can agree on a joint decision.

14 Howe, 2010
15 Bennett & Cass, 1989; Wegerif & Scrimshaw, 1997
16 Webb, Nemer & Ing, 2006
17 Littleton & Mercer, 2013
18 Resnick, Asterhan & Clarke, 2015
19 Mercer & Littleton, 2007, Chapter 6; Coltman et al., 2013
20 Mercer & Littleton, 2007, p. 97

Transcript 1: Group Agreement (below) is an extract from a whole class discussion in which 9- and 10-year old children and their teacher (T) set about considering the issue of talking to reach an agreement within a group. It illustrates how a teacher can familiarise students with the idea of Exploratory Talk and how it can be used in group work.

Transcript 1: Group Agreement

T: I think our learning intention for this bit of the lesson, is to make sure that you agree on your group answer. So you might have different opinions but your focus for this session is to make sure that you're going to agree with the other people in your group. So there's a problem there, because what happens if you don't agree with them – are you just going to get up and leave the room or tell them they're rubbish? Ben what would you do?

Ben: Um – give them reasons why that, why you think that's the answer.

T: So you could give them a good reason, and then what if they thought your reasons weren't good reasons, what could they do?

Ben: They could give some of their own reasons or –

T: And they know you'd be happy to listen don't they? So they've got the chance to give you their reasons in return. Thank you, that's a help. What were you going to say Clarrie?

Clarrie: Take it in turns to say your ideas and you can decide which was the best one.

T: So taking turns, so everybody's heard everything and then go with all those ideas and work out what's the best. That that sounds a good strategy as well doesn't it? Euan?

Euan: You could always compromise.

T: What does that mean? *(child doesn't reply)* I think you're right – give us an example?

Euan: Well you could gather up all the ideas of the group, and then work out the points of it and try and come up with a good answer for it. And then you, once you've got your answer you actually look back at the question and see if it's a sensible answer for the question, because sometimes the answer wanders off to something stupid.

T: That's a good point isn't it? You can lose your focus and wander off with something that's interesting – it might not be stupid but maybe not relevant. Good point; Rowan?

Rowan: You could decide on, on a neutral answer which is one that can go either way

Gussi: ne, ach doch (*no, I mean yes*)

T: Ok so you can come up with something that takes everybody's opinions and gives you – I like your word neutral, helpful sometimes. Fletcher?

Fletcher: Well instead of causing an argument, if two people say it, it wins, there's more answers to the 'yes' than 'no'. And if, if two of you aren't sure you put down not sure.

T: Right OK, so you could make sure that the majority of people said what they thought, but keep a note that other people thought differently. Great, well I'm going to ask you to talk about these questions in the way you just described, to come up with a group answer.

Comment

The teacher offers an understanding of how and why to use Exploratory Talk to discuss things, giving reasons. For the children, this is a way in to understanding themselves and their world. With this strategy the child can take on curriculum learning and make sensible choices about both abstract and hypothetical ideas. They can hear a range of points of view and find out that learning may involve having to 'change your mind' if you are convinced by effective reasoning.

In *Transcript 2: Tissue Paper* three children aged 9-10 years (two of whom are English language learners) are working together in the classroom on a science project. They are predicting how many sheets of paper will completely obscure a light source. They have been asked to do so using Exploratory Talk.

Transcript 2: Tissue Paper[21]

Ross: OK. (*reads*) 'Talk together about a plan to test all the different types of paper.'

Alana: Dijek, how much did you think it would be for tissue paper?

Dijek: At least ten because tissue paper is thin. Tissue paper can wear out and you can see through it… and light can shine through it.

Alana: OK. Thanks. (*to Ross*) Why do you think it?

Ross: Because I tested it before!

Alana: No, Ross, what did you think? How much did you think? Tissue paper. How much tissue paper did you think it would be to block out the light?

Ross: At first I thought it would be five, but second…

Alana: Why did you think that?

Ross: Because when it was [using] the overhead projector you could see a little bit of it, but not all of it, so I thought it would be like, five to block out the light.

Alana: That's a good reason. I thought, I thought it would be between five and seven because, I thought it would be between five and seven because normally when you're at home if you lay it on top, with one sheet you can see through but if you lay on about five or six pieces on top you can't see through.

Comment

It can be seen that the children ask each other for information and opinions; they seek reasons and provide them and evaluate any proposals that are made. The group members work towards a joint conclusion. Opinions are treated with respect, and each speaker has the opportunity to develop their ideas. These children have been taught to ask one another, 'What do you think? Why?' and to listen to one another's ideas, so are well on the way to generating Exploratory Talk – the kind of reasoned discussion that is necessary for successful collaboration[22].

For Exploratory Talk to be taken up and used by students, research suggests that a teacher needs to:

1. model and guide children's use of language for reasoning. They should ask children to give reasons to support their views, engage them in extended discussions of topics, and encourage them to see what makes discussion productive;

2. establish a set of 'Ground Rules' for generating Exploratory Talk during group work, building on children's own awareness of what makes a good discussion.

Figure 3 is a set of Ground rules for Exploratory Talk which a teacher agreed with her class[23].

Our Ground Rules for Talk 🙂

✓ Everyone should be invited to speak

✓ Everyone should listen carefully

✓ We will ask for, and give, reasons

✓ We can agree or disagree

✓ Everyone respects what is said in the group

✓ We will share what we know

✓ We will make a group decision after talking

Figure 3. Ground Rules for Exploratory Talk

21 Mercer & Howe, 2012, p. 16
22 Littleton & Mercer, 2013
23 See thinkingtogether.educ.cam.ac.uk/resources/
Ground_rules_for_Exploratory_Talk.pdf

In summary, research has shown that simply asking students to work in groups may not be productive. But research has shown that if students are taught how to use Exploratory Talk, group activity can be a powerful aid to learning[24, 25].

Teaching public speaking and presentation

Research suggests that presentational skills should be taught explicitly, and not just be expected to emerge indirectly through attempts to build children's social confidence. Indeed, it is rather that expressly teaching children how to use spoken language is key to developing their social confidence[26, 27]. Innovative institutions which have prioritised oracy education, such as School 21 in the UK[28], have used techniques in which students begin by preparing short (5 minute) talks on a topic of their choice. They are taught the skills they need to prepare and give this talk. They then present to a group of peers (who each will also make a speech). Constructive feedback is given by both the teacher and group members. Recent publications by two British charitable trusts involved in promoting oracy, the English-Speaking Union and Voice21, have gathered evidence to argue for the value of training children in the skills of public presentation and debate[29, 30].

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It has been claimed, on the basis of research evidence, that students' spoken communication skills can be enhanced by engaging them in such practices such as philosophical inquiry and structured debate[31]. However, such activities are not strategies for the *teaching of* oracy skills. Rather, they are activities which usefully allow children to *practice* certain oracy skills in a meaningful context. In our view, explicit teaching is still required.

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. Of course, a difficult topic to research as evidence of listening can only be gathered indirectly, such as through answers to questions. Teaching listening involves making explicit some listening strategies which precede listening comprehension. Children need to know:

1. **why** they should listen; the impact this will have on learning;

2. **how** to listen; physical factors and focusing attention;

3. that the effort of listening will not be unnecessary.

Research suggests that the nature and functions of careful listening should be clarified so that they are apparent to children. It is helpful to ask children to say what helps them to listen, and what hinders, in different contexts. Listening activities designed to focus attention for increasing amounts of time, or on increasingly complex ideas, should be provided with chances to discuss what impact these are having, allowing the child to build up a picture of themselves as increasingly able to listen to a range of things in a variety of environments. What is heard should be recalled, using collective and individual memory, and put to use.

Based on a review of research on listening in learning a second language, we can highlight some key listening skills that we need to teach[32]. Using pre-listening activities, the child can systematically learn how and why to attend to:

1. new content and vocabulary;

2. context cues;

3. visual aids, repetition, rhyme, music, song.

Unsurprisingly, the use of authentic listening activities seems to lead to greater improvement in listening comprehension than if artificial tasks are used[33]. Other factors can also be influential. For example, children's skill development may benefit from being asked to attend to a range of voices, rather than just ones with which they are very familiar.

24 Dawes & Warwick, 2012
25 Dawes & Sams, 2017
26 Mannion & Mercer, 2016
27 Mercer, 2016
28 See http://www.school21.org.uk
29 ESU, 2016
30 Millard & Menzies, 2016
31 EEF (2017)
32 Berne, 1998, pp. 169-170
33 Herron & Seay, 1991

An Example of Teaching Oracy Skills

We can usefully consider an example of a specific and crucial skill; 'Ask for and give reasons'. Imagine an upper primary classroom, in which children have previously been taught what reasons are, what reasons are relevant (good reasons), how to ask one another to contribute, how to include all group members, how to listen, and how to formulate and share their own reasons; and why all these skills matter, in terms of having learning conversations with classmates. 'Ask for and give reasons' should be understandable as encompassing all these skills by talk-trained children aged 9 or 10 years. A context for discussion is essential. Fortunately the curriculum is full of interesting content which merits discussion. Oracy skills are best taught paired with curriculum objectives, so that children learn spoken language competence simultaneously with learning about science, mathematics, English or another language. In a CLIL setting, learning objectives for oracy skills can be paired with those for subject teaching, which means that oracy is and remains an everyday concern of the classroom, and is constantly learned, practiced, reviewed and assessed. So for example, a secondary science lesson could have the paired objectives of 'Understanding the phases of the moon' and 'Giving good reasons to support any answers' – and the extent to which both had been achieved could be considered in a whole-class plenary at the end of the lesson. Talk invariably takes longer than expected, especially when children become involved and interested. It is crucial to allocate a sensible amount of time to the teaching and practice of oracy, so that such activities as discussion, presentation, and asking questions can happen in a measured manner rather than in a rush or not at all.

'Ask for and give reasons' – some examples of possible topics for oracy activities are:

1. What makes the moon change shape?

2. Why do these six leaves look different when they all do the same job for their plant?

3. Which is your favourite character in this story?

4. On this timetable, is it usually possible to travel from York to Leeds in less than an hour?

5. Does the picture show that people are well prepared for a flood in this town?

6. Which of these five pictures should be hung on the wall in the entrance hall?

Let us take, for example, Topic 6. The session starts with the teacher providing input on asking for and giving reasons, and about the five pictures in question, and on the importance of the choice the groups will make. Groups discuss their ideas using Exploratory Talk. In the plenary session, the teacher asks for decisions about the pictures, with reasons. She also asks groups to say who helped their thinking by asking them to contribute, what they heard that was interesting or made them think twice, and crucially, who asked for and gave reasons that influenced how the group arrived at its ultimate decision. Such immediate examples of oracy achievement reinforce learning. Problems with the discussion are openly shared so that the class can amend the 'ground rules' for group work (as described earlier) they are using if necessary. Children who contributed well would be given positive feedback, and others asked to consider how they could improve their performance.

Talking Points: an activity for practicing Exploratory Talk

Research has shown that a type of activity called Talking Points is very effective for stimulating and sustaining Exploratory Talk[34]. Talking Points are thought-provoking statements which encourage children to talk to one another about a topic, sharing what they know and understand, and what they do not know or are unsure about. It is vital to note that Talking Points are not questions; research has shown that they generate more imaginative and longer responses from students than do questions on the same topic. They help children to focus on a topic and to compare their point of view with that of others. During their group talk, individual children may well reach the limits of their understanding and realise that there is more to think about and learn. They require creative, analytical or evaluative thinking; they require children to provide reasons for what they say. Talking Points are written in straightforward

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34 Dawes & Warwick, 2012

language with simple vocabulary. They are easy to read so that children can concentrate their thinking on the subject under discussion. Children in discussion share their personal experiences and understanding. They begin to see that some of their ideas are hypothetical and fluid and can be affected by new evidence or insight. They recognise that classmates are a valuable resource for new thinking.

Talking Points can be used at the start of a topic, to evaluate baseline understanding; during a topic, to share ideas, plan or consider other points of view; and at the end of a topic, as formative assessment, to establish what has been learnt, and to consider next steps. They can be devised for any topic by the teacher or by the children.

Some examples of Talking Points

For each set of **Talking Points** students would be asked:

> ‘Do you and your group agree or disagree with these ideas, or are you unsure? For what reasons?’

1. 'Sunflowers' by Vincent Van Gogh
   - Vincent has written his name too large.
   - These flowers need water.
   - Orange and blue do not go well together.
   - This picture makes me feel happy.

2. *Romeo And Juliet*: Act 1 Scene 1[35]
   - Rivalry between the Montagues and Capulets is continued only by the men of the families.
   - The Prince is sure that making threats will end the violence.
   - Benvolio gives a truthful account of what started the fight.
   - Tybalt calls Benvolio a coward; he is right.
   - Romeo would be happier if he took up sport or spent time studying – he is just bored.

3. Magnets
   - Magnets have poles. The north pole of a magnet points north.
   - Magnets always point in the same direction if free to move.
   - You can make magnetism from electricity, and electricity from magnetism.
   - Magnets don't work under water.
   - If you cut a magnet in half, you get two magnets.

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35 Taken from Dawes, 2013, p. 11.

Part 4: Oracy and bilingual development

Until the 1960s, reviews of research on bilingualism tended to conclude that growing up bilingually could cause some kind cognitive 'overload'. This sometimes led to parents avoiding teaching their children two languages. However, the general consensus of researchers today is that growing up bilingual has more cognitive advantages than disadvantages[36]. For example, it seems that bilingual children perform better in non-verbal problem-solving tasks which depend on selective attention or inhibitory control; it seems that their abilities to control and select have been enhanced through exercising linguistic choices between different languages[37, 38]. This kind of advantage seems to be sustained throughout a bilingual person's life.

Research on bilingualism also supports the view that some oracy skills are not language specific. The extent of a speaker's vocabulary and mastery of grammar will, of course, limit their fluency, and perhaps their intelligibility, in any specific language. But people who, for example, have learned to appreciate the importance of taking account of a listener's knowledge and perspective when conversing, or have learned some rhetorical strategies for presenting information persuasively to an audience (such as using three-part lists of important points), should be able to apply that knowledge in more than one language. Likewise, people who have learned to listen carefully to what others say and have learned the basic social rules for using talk effectively for working in a team, should be able to apply what they know in more than one language setting.

Nevertheless, it is of course important to recognise that children grow up using language in specific cultural contexts; and that the 'ground rules' for using talk in social settings often vary between cultures. For example, it is a common observation that in Dutch culture expressing personal opinions directly and forthrightly in public discussions is normal, while in Japanese and Mexican cultures that may be seen as insensitive or even rude (with the British somewhere in the middle). This means that teachers' expectations that students 'challenge ideas' in group discussions or public presentations will need to be tempered by a sensitivity to cultural norms.

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36 Diaz, 1983; Grosjean, 2010
37 Bialystok & Feng, 2010
38 Bialystock et al., 2005

Part 5: Assessing oracy

Deciding on the purpose of assessment informs the process. Oracy can be assessed in order to make rapid decisions about what a child or children need to learn next; to report to parents, colleagues or other professionals; or can be self-assessed so that children can identify aspects of their own development and consider their progression. Children's talk during whole-class sessions or during group activities can be used to assess not only their spoken language skills but also their learning in curriculum subjects. Such everyday assessment can influence planning to meet the needs identified.

Assessment of oracy can seem difficult. Spoken language is ephemeral, and capturing discussion may alter its nature. There may be a limit to the number of children that can be assessed at any one time. Accurate assessment of an individual may well involve collecting evidence in a range of relevant, and if possible, authentic contexts to build up a comprehensive picture. Presentation and discussion necessarily involve two or more people, and individual performance is affected by who those people are, and what they are talking about. Problems also involve the amount of time talk takes, which always seems longer than expected. These issues, and ways of dealing with them in making formal assessments, are still being tackled by researchers[39]. Increasingly, assessment tools are being developed for the EFL classroom, by Cambridge University Press and other organisations.

Nevertheless, a simple conversation by a teacher with a child, especially once trust is established, can tell a teacher much about their oracy, their capacity to communicate, vocabulary, confidence, ability to explain or question or recall ideas, and so on. Assessment then must begin with decisions about both its purpose and the specific skill or set of skills under evaluation. As with any curriculum subject, this should be related to what the child has been taught, or can expect to be taught. Students can also be encouraged to become involved in self and peer assessment of oracy skills, if a supportive and constructive classroom environment can be created for such activity.

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39 Mercer, Warwick & Ahmed, 2016

Summary and conclusions

1. Research in psychology, sociolinguistics and education supports the view that the development of young people's spoken language skills can have a significant impact on their educational attainment, social confidence and occupational success.

2. Research suggests that oracy skills need to be taught, just as the skills of literacy, mathematics, science, and so on are taught. Effective ways of teaching oracy skills have been developed, and so there is no reason why such skills should not be given direct attention in the language classroom, or indeed as part of the mainstream curriculum.

3. Oracy includes the range of skills involved in all types of speech situations. These include collaborative problem solving, guiding or teaching another person, listening sensitively to another's experience, and interviewing (and being interviewed) as well as public speaking, debate and dramatic role-playing.

4. Oracy skills need not be considered language-specific. If a speaker has learned how to use spoken language effectively in different contexts, this should inform their behaviour when using any language. For example, a speaker who is skilled in taking account of the knowledge of an audience when making a presentation, or in using language to collaborate in a group, should be able to apply that understanding when using any language.

5. Whilst oracy skills deserve to be taught explicitly, research suggests that the development of talk skills is best embedded in the teaching and learning of all subjects. This is particularly relevant to CLIL approaches to teaching a second language. Pairing oracy and curriculum learning intentions means that oracy can be integrated into everyday teaching and learning. Strategies such as Talking Points can support and sustain learning conversations which involve every child in a class.

6. The assessment of oracy skills has special challenges which are not encountered in the assessment of writing skills, because talk is transient, context-bound and necessarily interactive. However, new, practical methods of assessing spoken language skills are being developed which should make this manageable for teachers

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Appendix

An Oracy Lesson Plan

Discussing 'Tall Nettles' by Edward Thomas

Students will already have an awareness of Exploratory Talk, have devised a class set of Ground Rules for Talk and agreed to use them, and have learned about attentive listening.

Learning Intentions

- To discuss ideas using the Ground rules for Talk, with a focus on **listening and responding to ideas**.

- To examine a poem and come to group agreement about the poem to share.

WHOLE CLASS Introduction

Ask students to rehearse the Ground Rules for Talk.

Ask questions to elicit knowledge about listening, thinking, challenging ideas, reflecting on what is heard. Focus the class on careful listening and responding.

GROUP WORK

Read the poem. Ask the groups to read the poem together and discuss their ideas about each of the Talking Points, making sure that everyone is asked to contribute, that reasons are given, and contributions build on what has been said before. If the group needs a structure they could begin by each person saying:

> 'I agree, because….' or 'I disagree, because….'

Ensure that the class understand the focus on listening and responding to one another.

WHOLE CLASS Plenary

Invite the group to provide their summary of their ideas about the poem. Is it interesting and worth discussing? Did the discussion help you to see more in it?

Ask the group to evaluate the quality of their talk together. Did they ask questions? Did everyone contribute? Can anyone provide an example of attentive listening in action? What was a memorable response? Did the Ground Rules help? If not, what new rules might be created?

EXTENSIONS

Draw and annotate a joint illustration for their poem.

Ask the group to write together to create a poem.

Ask the groups to write three more Talking Points, or a set of Talking Points for a different poem.

Talking Points: Tall Nettles

Read the poem together, then taking it in turns read one of the talking points. Using the Ground Rules for Exploratory Talk, discuss each talking point. Remember that the quality of your talk with each other is very important.

Tall Nettles by Edward Thomas

Tall nettles cover up, as they have done
These many springs, the rusty harrow, the plough
Long worn out, and the roller made of stone.
Only the elm butt tops the nettles now.
This corner of the farmyard I like most:
As well as any bloom upon a flower
I like the dust on nettles, rarely lost
Except to prove the sweetness of a shower.

Talking Points

- Lots of clues show that this poem was written a long time ago.

- The nettles are weeds and should be destroyed.

- The writer is a farmer who is wasting time.

- The farm went out of business because of bad management.

- The writer likes things the way they are.

- It's unusual to prefer nettles to flowers, and rain to fine weather.

- Nettle leaves are often dusty because they are spiny and catch dust.

- Some things do well if left undisturbed.

- The poem was written in June.

- We dislike this poem.

- It makes you wonder how much the writer enjoyed being a soldier.

- It makes you wish it was summer and we were all outside.

- It would be interesting to write a poem which changes how people look at things they don't usually like, like nettles, wasps, slugs, etc.

Decide together, in your group, how you would **summarise** your response to this poem.

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