



Voice 21's Journal

The Talking Point

Summer
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Contents

5

Introduction Amy Gaunt

6

Talk for learning

Talking about art develops students’ visual literacy
Amy Howe

9

Valuing every voice

All students should be encouraged to express
themselves authentically at school
Shaquille Scott-Davis

12

Valuing every voice

Oracy education supports reluctant speakers to
participate in exploratory talk
Helen Hillman

16

Valuing every voice

Oracy education improves behaviour and wellbeing
Kanwal Sheikh

18

Talk for learning

Dialogue shapes thoughtful discourse in RE
Grace Barron

20

Talk for learning

Oracy education can support metacognition
and self-regulation
Jennie Burbidge

Douglas Barnes Research Projects

22

Winner of the Douglas Barnes Award

Oracy education improves analytical writing skills
Rahel Abebe

24

Teaching discussion skills improves analytical writing
Kate Burton

26

Discussion guidelines improve turn-taking
Vicki Page

Amy Gaunt

Introduction

At Voice 21, we are continually developing our understanding of oracy; researching and innovating new ways to provide young people with a high-quality oracy education.

Just as we do not believe there is one 'right' way to speak, we do not believe that there is one 'right' way to provide a high-quality oracy education: schools are complex, unique places and what works well in one setting may not be effective in another. This is why we believe in empowering teachers and school leaders to choose what works in their context, providing them with the guidance and tools they need to develop approaches which work for them and their students.

We do this in different ways and this second edition of our annual journal, *The Talking Point*, perfectly distills many of these. To provide schools with first-class guidance on implementing different facets of oracy education, it is essential that we are up-to-date in our research and thinking. This year, we have focused particularly on developing practical guidance on teaching 'disciplinary oracy' which involves inducting students into the unique ways of speaking (and therefore thinking) in different subject disciplines. You can learn more about this in articles on developing disciplinary approaches to oracy in art and RE contributed by Voice 21's very own Amy Howe and Grace Barron.

Sometimes, when working with schools, it is our role to help them avoid the potential pitfalls of oracy education. This includes supporting our schools to avoid narrow interpretations of oracy education, which focus solely on improving students' command of 'standard English', rather than recognising the rich language repertoires students already bring into the classroom. In his article entitled 'All students should be encouraged to express themselves authentically at school', Shaquille Scott-Davis, former School Relationship Officer at Voice 21, explores this issue, providing practical guidance on how to recognise, value and celebrate Creole languages in the classroom.

What is a Talking Point?

A Talking Point is a thought provoking statement which promotes discussion.

At Voice 21, we also recognise the valuable role individual teachers and leaders play in furthering understanding of high-quality oracy education. This edition includes two articles from leaders in Voice 21 Oracy Schools and Centres of Excellence who set out how implementing oracy education has supported other whole-school priorities: behaviour, wellbeing and metacognition. At Voice 21, we often refer to oracy as the 'golden thread' which should run through a school; these two articles exemplify why and what this looks like.

Also included are the winning and highly-commended entries to our annual Douglas Barnes Award. Each year, just as Douglas Barnes conducted pioneering, innovative classroom research on the role of talk in young people's learning, we encourage teachers in Voice 21 schools to engage in classroom research to develop their understanding of, and expertise in, a specific aspect of oracy, evaluating the difference this makes to the students they teach. We hope these reflections inspire you to consider how you could further develop oracy in your classroom and, perhaps, to enter the Douglas Barnes Award next year.

Thank you to everyone who has generously shared their insights and reflections in this journal and also to my colleague Rebekah Simon-Caffyn who has commissioned and curated such a thought-provoking collection of Talking Points. I hope that, just as Talking Points prompt discussion amongst students in the classroom, these articles provoke conversations about oracy amongst you and your colleagues.

Amy Gaunt, Director of Learning, Impact & Influence, Voice 21



Amy Howe Talk for Learning

Talking about art develops students’ visual literacy

Art has the capacity to speak to us all: ‘We hear what art has to say by listening, looking, participating and imagining¹.’ We can use the messages of art and cultural artefacts as stimuli for engaging with each other and with the world around us.

Voice 21 and the National Gallery have worked in partnership to pilot a short course exploring the relationship between oracy and art, including how art can be used as a stimulus for talk.

The visual world and oracy

Speaking about art is often seen as exclusive, pretentious or deliberately ambiguous², closing doors to the enjoyment and value of the arts. Too often, the confidence to speak about art sits with a privileged few. Yet, in an image-saturated world, it is crucial that students are taught to become visually literate with the skills to interpret visual messages and formulate thoughtful and critical responses to them.

Cultural artefacts are unique stimuli for exploratory talk: they are open-ended, invite discussion and offer diverse perspectives that cross disciplines and cultures. Art can be a springboard for students to engage critically and constructively with a range of different ideas and viewpoints; students become better thinkers by verbalising their thinking out loud, together.

Speak to express

When we ‘speak to express’ we are learning to use descriptive language to share our feelings and responses to art. We are invited into the conversation and experience our reactions to art as valued.

When students speak to express ideas about an artefact or work of art, they are sharing a personal response – what they like or dislike about the work, how it makes them feel, or what it might remind them of. This type of expressive talk can be intimidating for students because it involves sharing their own ideas and opinions, which can open them up to criticism or vulnerability.

To overcome this, it is important to foster a culture for talk where everyone knows they have the right to speak about art, and that their contributions matter in building a shared understanding³. This is key to changing the narrative that speaking about art is for a privileged few: every voice has value, and everyone has the right to share their opinions about the visual world.

One way to do this is by encouraging students to share questions about a piece of art. This builds their curiosity and supports them to engage critically with a stimulus. As facilitators of the discussion, we can use students’ questions as genuine springboards for learning. By inviting students to generate questions about what they see, we encourage intrigue, promoting authentic discourse.

1. Meniru, D. (2023). How Does Art Speak? <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/lyle-ashton-harris-29038/how-does-art-speak>
2. Rule, A. & Levine, D. (2019). International Art English. Triple Canopy

3. Ibid p. 20

Speak to analyse

When we speak to analyse in art, we are developing our ‘visual literacy’. We are being inducted into ways of thinking and speaking⁴ like an artist or art critic.

Speaking to analyse is about helping students to make comparisons, to critically examine artistic techniques using subject-specific vocabulary, or to engage in purposeful discussion, considering and evaluating the choices an artist has made and the impact these have had.

A great way to stimulate this sort of high-quality discussion is to ‘zoom in’ on or isolate a small part of a piece of artwork. This enables students to practise their analytical talk about a particular aspect of the art before applying this to the overall piece. This sort of talk draws on the cognitive strand of the Oracy Framework, providing students with opportunities to articulate their reasoning and justify their thinking, as well as to engage critically and constructively with others’ ideas.

4. Moorghen, A. (2023). Is every teacher a teacher of oracy? *English: Journal of the English Association*, Volume 72, Issue 278, Autumn 2023, Pages 126–130 <https://doi.org/10.1093/english/efad030>

To equip students to speak like a specialist in art, it is also important to teach them the vocabulary and phrases they need to do this effectively. This will vary depending on the art students are studying but may include terminology such as ‘abstract,’ ‘composition’ or ‘texture’ or phrases such as, ‘I believe the artist wanted to...’ or ‘the mood of the piece is...’. Trying out new language in low-stakes, talk-based contexts builds students’ confidence, providing them with multiple opportunities to both hear and use new vocabulary in context.

“Cultural artefacts are unique stimuli for exploratory talk: they are open-ended, invite discussion and offer diverse perspectives that cross disciplines and cultures.”



Impact

The visual world is a pedagogical tool that we should use to elevate learning across the curriculum. In this project, we have supported participating schools to explore art as a stimulus for talk, giving students opportunities to develop their knowledge, understanding and personal connection to art through talk, whilst teaching them the disciplinary oracy skills they need to talk about art effectively in different contexts.

Together, Voice 21 and the National Gallery have released a pilot short course, *Voicing the Visual*, that explores the relationship between oracy and art. The collaboration aims to not only demystify what it means to speak about art, but also to use art and oracy as a gateway to engaging students in social and academic talk, improving confidence, participation and wellbeing.



Amy Howe, Programme Lead: Classroom Practice, Voice 21

“The visual world is a pedagogical tool that we should use to elevate learning across the curriculum.”



Shaquille Scott-Davis Valuing Every Voice

All students should be encouraged to express themselves authentically at school

Students have long spoken Creole languages in UK schools. Historically, these languages and their speakers have often been denigrated and marginalised^{1,2}.

However, it is crucial, especially as schools attend to oracy and students’ spoken language, that we right this wrong. All students deserve to feel that they and their communities are valued at school. This includes deploying their full range of linguistic assets when learning in the classroom. This piece contextualises Creole languages, and brings to bear culturally relevant teaching and an understanding of bidialectalism to suggest approaches schools may take to best support their students.

Creole languages

Creole languages deriving from the African continent and the Caribbean have a long and rich history in the UK and within schools. There are many examples of the cultural importance of Creole languages, from the use of Trinidadian English Creole used in the dialogue of Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* to the writing and dub poetry (a form of performance poetry of Jamaican origin) of Benjamin Zephaniah to the poetry of Louise Bennet-Coverly.

1. Siegel, J. (1999). Creoles and Minority Dialects in Education: An Overview. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 20(6), 508–531. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434639908666387>
2. Sutton Trust (2022). *Speaking Up*. <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Accents-and-social-mobility.pdf>



Accent	the way in which people in a particular area, country, or social group pronounce words (<i>Cambridge Dictionary</i>)
Dialect	a particular form of a language which is peculiar to a specific region or social group (Oxford Languages, OUP)
Language	a system of communication used by a particular country or community (Oxford Languages, OUP)

Researchers consistently find that some ways of speaking are seen as more prestigious than others, with Afro-Caribbean accents and dialects often found near the bottom of the rankings³. They are typically discouraged within school settings in favour of ‘standard English.’ This fuels the conception of a language hierarchy and fails to appreciate the linguistic distinctness of the language and its unique structure distinct from ‘standard English.’

3. Ibid.

This linguistic discrimination often compounds with other existing biases, including classism and racism, creating substantial barriers for Creole speakers during their time at school. Consequently, students who speak, or whose families speak Creole, may be less inclined to contribute for fear of continuous correction or because they are discouraged from expressing themselves authentically at school. Our ways of using language and our identity are inextricably linked and so this is likely to have an impact on these students' confidence and self-esteem⁴.

Culturally Relevant Teaching

The educational theory of Culturally Relevant Teaching, though it is a wide-ranging theory that includes different branches of pedagogy and practice, broadly focuses on methods that incorporate students' cultural identities and lived experiences into the classroom as tools for effective instruction⁵. Overall, the research demonstrates that the use of culturally relevant educational pedagogy and practice has a positive impact on students' grasp of academic skills and concepts, as well as their ethnic-racial identity development⁶.

It is important, then, that we learn more about the languages, dialects and accents we hear in our schools in order to understand and celebrate the diverse linguistic repertoires of our students. And that we use this understanding to help students develop their linguistic repertoires and navigate the choices available to them about how to speak, when, to whom and for what purpose. This is especially important in contexts where students' cultural identities and lived experiences differ from that of all or most of their teachers.

4. Cheshire, J. (2005) Sociolinguistics: an introductory handbook of the science of language and society. 2nd edition, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 2341-2350.
5. Aronson, B., & Laughter, J. (2016). The Theory and Practice of Culturally Relevant Education: A Synthesis of Research Across Content Areas. Review of Educational Research, 86(1), 163–206. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24752872>
6. Byrd, C. M. (2016). Does Culturally Relevant Teaching Work? An Examination From Student Perspectives. Sage Open, 6(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244016660744>

In your context:

- ? What dialects do you hear most frequently?
- ? Do you 'correct' or ask students to stop using particular dialects? When and why?
- ? What might be the impact of this on your students?

Recognise students as bidialectal and understand the benefits of this

Rather than viewing the use of Creole 'dialects' as a deficiency, some are moving to consider these students to be bidialectal, meaning they are fluent in two dialects of language. These students can switch seamlessly between communicating within their communities and communicating within a school context.

This is comparable to how students who speak English as an additional language switch languages, and research has indicated that bidialectalism may confer the same benefits reported for multilingual children. Bidialectalism should therefore be viewed as an asset which is recognised and celebrated at school.⁷

In your context:

- ? What do you do in your school to educate about and celebrate linguistic diversity?
- ? How can you ensure bidialectalism is celebrated alongside multilingualism?
- ? Where students are learning through talk, how can you ensure all students are celebrated for the ideas they bring, and not excluded by their own or others' ways of speaking?

7. Antoniou, K., Grohmann, K. K., Kambanaros, M., & Katsos, N. (2016). The effect of childhood bilectalism and multilingualism on executive control. Cognition, 149, 18–30. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2015.12.002>

Understand the different ways that students can speak 'formally'

Through the creation of spaces in schools encouraging students to practise using their existing linguistic repertoires, students can learn more about varieties of ways to express themselves within their dialects. This might involve thinking about a wider range of opportunities for talk and authentic audiences than you might ordinarily attend to.

Often, there can be a binary between what is considered professional/formal speech and unprofessional/informal speech, with 'standard English' considered essential for formal communication⁸. This may not necessarily be true; rather there can be different formal speech for when talking to a visitor from Ofsted, compared to talking to an elder within your own community such as an Auntie, faith or community leader. Both require formality, but not necessarily 'standard English'.

In your context:

- ? What examples of formal and informal speech could you use to expose students to a range of exemplars which reflect the diversity of accents and dialects in your school community?



8. National Curriculum (2014). English Programmes of Study. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-english-programmes-of-study/national-curriculum-in-england-english-programmes-of-study>

Conclusion

Recognising and valuing Creole languages in UK schools is an essential step towards fostering an inclusive educational environment. By integrating culturally relevant teaching and acknowledging bidialectalism, schools can celebrate the different ways that students speak, and understand the benefits that linguistic diversity can bring. This approach can lead to better academic achievement and also support students to develop a positive cultural identity. Schools' commitment to linguistic diversity and inclusivity will ultimately enrich the educational experience for all students, and will create an environment where students that speak historically marginalised dialects feel proud, included and celebrated.

Shaquille Scott-Davis, former School Relationship Officer, Voice 21



Helen Hillman Valuing Every Voice

Oracy education supports reluctant speakers to participate in exploratory talk

Almost every class has at least one ‘quiet student.’ There are a number of reasons why a child may be ‘quiet’ – they could be new to the English language, have communication difficulties, additional learning needs, or may just not feel confident speaking in front of people.

Some ‘quiet’ children may find taking part in class discussions challenging. This may be because speaking up in class can lead to students being more visible to other students, bringing attention to themselves and causing them to have to deal with unpredictability¹.

While the barriers that ‘quiet’ students face to participation are personal and contextual, there are overarching features that are common to many ‘quiet’ students. They may struggle to find appropriate opportunities to contribute to discussions, have internalised and limited conceptions of themselves and their abilities, a fear of making mistakes or may be worried about the necessity of thinking and speaking quickly. An overarching theme common to many ‘quiet’ students is their need for more time to think before sharing their ideas verbally^{2,3}.

By thinking about and preempting the challenges that ‘quiet’ students face when learning through talk, we work towards creating inclusive classroom cultures in which ‘quiet’ students are supported to participate in and benefit from classroom talk.



“By thinking about and preempting the challenges that ‘quiet’ students face when learning through talk, we work towards creating inclusive classroom cultures in which ‘quiet’ students are supported to participate in and benefit from classroom talk.”

1. Nyborg, G., Mjelve, L. H., Edwards, A. & Crozier, W. R. (2020). Teacher’s strategies for enhancing shy children’s engagement in oral activities: necessary, but insufficient? *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 26 (7), 643-658
2. Townsend, J. S., & Fu, D. (1998). Quiet Students across Cultures and Contexts. *English Education*, 31(1), 4–19.
3. Davis, S., & Packer, R. (2023). Supporting young quiet, shy and anxious children in school. Government of Wales.

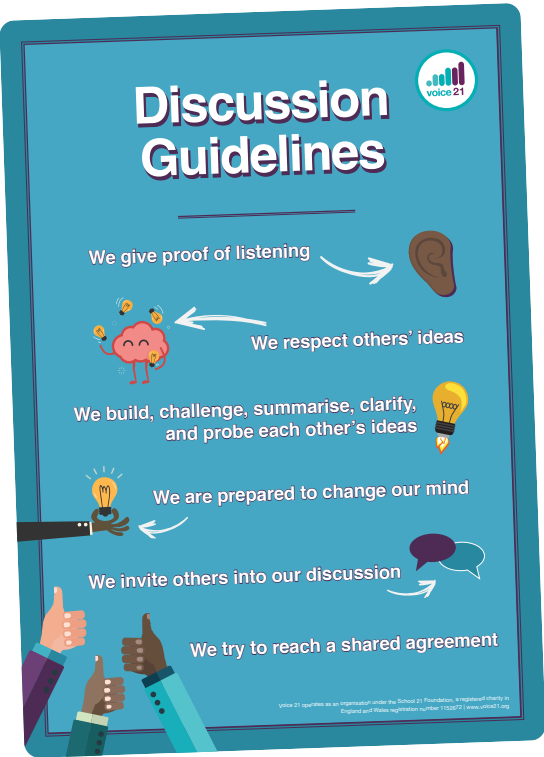
Creating a safe culture for talk

Creating a judgement-free, respectful environment where all students are invited to contribute to classroom discussions in whatever way they are comfortable, can mitigate some of the anxieties that ‘quiet’ students may feel.

To foster a safe and inclusive culture for talk in your classroom, start by co-constructing Discussion Guideline with students⁴. Importantly, these should also outline how students can be attentive listeners, for example by inviting others to contribute or elaborating on someone else’s contribution. This signals to students that their voice is of equal value within the classroom and also removes the need to compete with others to contribute.

‘Quiet’ students may also encounter difficulty in challenging the ideas of others. One way to support children to overcome this is to begin by ‘de-centre[ing] the child⁵.’ Do this by setting up activities where students do not need to evaluate each other’s ideas, but those of abstract characters or experts from outside of the classroom.

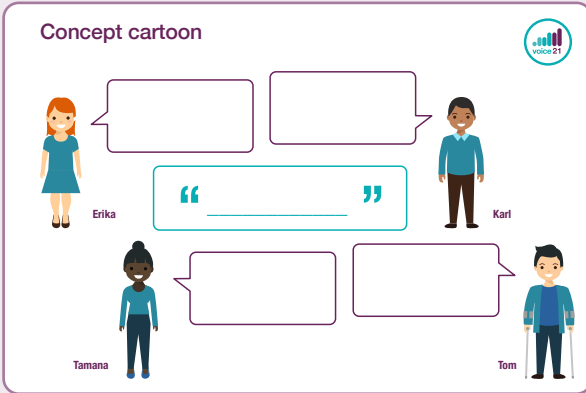
4. Thinking Together (2019) Ground Rules for Exploratory Talk.
5. Nyborg, G., Mjelve, L. H., Edwards, A. & Crozier, W. R. (2020). Teacher’s strategies for enhancing shy children’s engagement in oral activities: necessary, but insufficient? *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 26 (7), 643-658



“Sometimes, children need a starting point that isn’t all about them.”

Case Study

Barrowford School makes use of Concept Cartoons¹ for this exact purpose. Having identified a heightened sense of pressure amongst his students to ‘be right’ or ‘win’ an argument – something he attributes to the polarisation in wider society – Oracy Lead Karl Cross introduced Concept Cartoons. These feature a set of fictional characters putting forward different ideas or opinions on a particular subject. He has found that ‘quiet’ children especially feel more comfortable challenging the ideas of a character in a Concept Cartoon than those of their peers, suggesting that ‘sometimes, children need a starting point that isn’t all about them.’



1. Keogh, B., & Naylor, S. (1999). Concept cartoons, teaching and learning in science: an evaluation. *International Journal of Science Education*, 21(4), 431–446.

Strategies to build confidence

One of the primary issues that ‘quiet’ students report is not feeling confident to formulate their thoughts quickly in a discussion. To mitigate this, ensure that you give students enough time to start to formulate what they want to say before beginning a discussion. You could, for example, give them time to write down a few key ideas on a mini whiteboard before getting started.

Providing sentence stems to scaffold contributions to a discussion can also be particularly helpful for ‘quiet’ students. This enables them to focus on *what* they want to say rather than *how* to say it and can provide a good springboard into a discussion. To remove the pressure for ‘quiet’ students to contribute to small-group discussion, try using trios instead of pairs, enabling two students to talk together without stalling the conversation until a third student feels ready to join in.

Case Study

Louise Jenkins, a year 6 teacher in Leicester has found using a combination of these strategies in her classroom transformative, particularly for one student with a developmental language disorder. Louise would start with choral repetition of a sentence stem ‘allowing the child to warm up their voice without the pressure of others listening.’ She also ensured that she pre-taught the key vocabulary and/or sentence stems her student would be using in their discussion so that they were confident using them. Finally, she would place them in a trio grouping which enabled them to contribute when they felt comfortable but also to listen and learn from their peers.

Instigate

Present an idea or open up a new line of inquiry

“ I would like to start by saying ____

“ I think ____

“ We haven’t yet talked about ____

Instigate



Trio

Creating ‘safe’ opportunities for talk in larger groups

Another difficulty for ‘quiet’ students can be finding appropriate opportunities to contribute to a larger group discussion. When they don’t have a peer asking them directly what they think or when there isn’t a natural moment in a discussion for them to contribute, they may find it more difficult to speak up. However, there are a number of talk protocols which may be employed to support ‘quiet’ students in this context.

The ‘chair protocol,’ is where a larger group is assigned a chairperson who ensures that everyone in the group gets an equal opportunity to talk. A ‘quiet’ student can act as chair in a verbal or nonverbal capacity. Alternatively, they could take on the role of ‘silent summariser,’ where they must listen carefully in order to summarise the conversation once it has taken place – this can be done either orally or in writing. The ‘pass and go’ protocol enables students to take turns contributing to a class discussion with thinking time and the option to opt out (or ‘pass’) built in. This alleviates any anxiety students may have about putting their hand up as well as providing them with consistent, low stakes, opportunities to contribute to exploratory discussion.

Case Study

In **North East Surrey Short Stay School**, a Pupil Referral Unit, the ‘pass and go’ protocol is built into their ‘I-we-you’ lesson structure, as part of the ‘we’ section of the lesson. Clear routines are established to support this, with 30 seconds of wait time being afforded to each pupil and talk always moving in the clockwise direction. This fixed format reduces anxiety for many students, while those still reluctant to speak have the option to either say ‘pass’ or, if the teacher feels it is appropriate, to repeat or summarise what the previous person has said.

Conclusion

While ‘quiet’ students might struggle with speaking up in class for various reasons, there are many ways that they can be supported to participate in and benefit from opportunities to engage in talk for learning. These protocols and strategies must become routine to build the confidence of ‘quiet’ students and create a classroom culture where they feel safe, comfortable, included and encouraged to share their ideas.

“There are a number of talk protocols which may be employed to support ‘quiet’ students in this context.”

Top tips for being a chair

As chair, it is your job to make sure your group’s discussion is productive and runs smoothly. You should hold back from always giving your own opinions but instead encourage others to share theirs. Here are some tips to help you to do this:

Make sure you give everyone a chance to speak.

Be prepared to ask probing or clarifying questions and encourage others to do so too.

If you think your group has reached an agreement, or if the discussion is becoming repetitive, summarise the main points so far to help the discussion move forward.



If you notice someone hasn’t contributed, invite them to by saying their name or asking them a question.

Being chair is a big responsibility. Make sure that everyone gets a chance to take this role at some point.

Helen Hillman, Programme Lead, Voice 21



Kanwal Sheikh Valuing Every Voice

Oracy education can improve behaviour and wellbeing

For Earlham Primary School, one of the key reasons for becoming a Voice 21 Oracy School was to improve students' behaviour and ability to communicate their feelings. Through their commitment to embedding oracy education in every aspect of school life and gaining buy-in from the wider school community, Earlham have created a culture that values every voice and helps students feel confident and comfortable to articulate their feelings and express themselves.

Kanwal Sheikh, Class Teacher and Oracy Lead at Earlham Primary School, writes about the process of creating a culture of oracy that promotes the emotional wellbeing of students.

“Earlham have created a culture that values every voice and helps students feel confident and comfortable to articulate their feelings and express themselves.”

Oracy can improve behaviour and wellbeing

At Earlham Primary School (Eko Trust), we believe that oracy plays a vital role in shaping the behaviour and emotional wellbeing of our pupils. As such, we have made a conscious effort to embed oracy into our behaviour policy, striving to cultivate a culture of open dialogue and emotional expression. Our aim is to create an environment where students feel empowered to openly discuss their feelings and emotions in a restorative and non-judgmental manner and are fully equipped with the vocabulary and language skills necessary for effective communication.

Changes in practice

To achieve this vision, we have redefined the school's approach to behaviour management. The introduction of wellbeing check-ins at the start of each day has provided students with a structured opportunity to express how they are feeling which enables teachers to gauge the emotional state of the class. These check-ins encompass discussions on our five elements of wellbeing: Give, Take Notice, Stay Active, Keep Learning and Connect¹.

By reflecting on their own wellbeing and that of their peers, students develop a deeper understanding and appreciation of their own mental health and that of their peers (inside and outside the classroom), fostering empathy and understanding.

1. Aked, J. et al. (2008). Five Ways to Wellbeing. <https://neweconomics.org/2008/10/five-ways-to-wellbeing>



Restorative practice

As a 'Trauma Informed Primary School' in Greater London, we prioritise understanding of what a child or young person might be trying to express to us through their behaviour. Our detailed behaviour policy focuses on having restorative conversations with students to help them connect with their feelings and provide strategies for self-regulation. Instead of resorting to punitive measures, we facilitate open dialogue between the students and teachers. Using PACE (an approach developed by Dr Dan Hughes which stands for Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy) ensures that students feel safe and comfortable in voicing their thoughts and emotions.

Understanding that the unique needs of each student should be recognised and addressed sensitively, we scaffold this restorative chat by providing sentence stems and restorative action posters to support students to express themselves and resolve conflicts effectively.

Impact

Putting oracy at the forefront of our behaviour policy has yielded positive results. The reduction in behavioural issues following the introduction of oracy-based restorative chats is evidence of its efficacy. For example, during the 2023/24 academic year there were only three recorded behaviour concerns across the 472 pupils in the school – all of which were low level behaviour concerns (down from roughly two – three serious incidents per term in the preceding year).

All students demonstrate heightened emotional literacy and resilience, which can be seen in their ability to articulate their feelings and engage in constructive conflict resolution.

When Ofsted inspected the school in 2023, they found that, from 'the early years upwards, pupils are encouraged to recognise difficult emotions and feelings' and that 'teachers [across the school] encourage the behaviours that pupils need in order to be successful, such as attentive listening and taking turns during discussions. [Children also...] take account of each other's views in lessons.'

Additionally, there is a greater sense of empathy and understanding among students, creating a more inclusive and supportive environment in the classrooms and the overall school experience. This has also been noticed by our staff. As one of the Year 6 teachers stated, 'A benefit of oracy at our school is how good our students have become at expressing their socio-emotional needs. Our morning wellbeing check-ins provide children with a space to connect emotionally with their peers and teachers, learning how to listen and respond to others.'

Earlham Primary School is a Voice 21 Oracy Centre of Excellence.



Kanwal Sheikh, Class Teacher and Oracy Lead, Earlham Primary School



Grace Barron **Talk for Learning**

Dialogue shapes thoughtful discourse in RE

Dialogue is often considered to be the ‘USP’ of Religious Education (RE); evaluation questions make up 50% of the marks available in the Religious Studies GCSE, and require students to understand and articulate a range of views on a topic.

RE is also seen as a subject that prepares students for life in today’s society, giving students the knowledge, tools and skills to speak to each other about their opinions, views of the world and experiences. ‘Pedagogically, the development of... dialogic skills... are necessary prerequisites for creating a public sphere in which those from opposing backgrounds – faith and non-faith – can converse with each other in a reasoned manner¹.’

Teachers of RE should use dialogue to create opportunities for young people to learn more deeply about different religions and worldviews through talk. This can improve students’ understanding of self and others by enabling them to engage meaningfully with different viewpoints. To do this students must also learn the ways of knowing, thinking and talking in RE, such as how to critically examine another perspective or evaluate an argument with reference to different religious points of view. In short, they must also learn to talk effectively in RE.

“There’s no right or wrong answer”

RE offers a unique opportunity for young people to engage with complex questions that don’t have one ‘right’ answer. For this reason, it is easy to fall into the trap of teaching that all opinions hold equal weight. But to do this is to devalue the subject and, ultimately, to misinform our young people.

Instead, we should teach students the importance of holding space for complex and sometimes controversial topics. RE is not an opportunity for students to express their opinion and have it

respected, simply by virtue of it being their opinion; rather, it is an opportunity to explore a wide range of perspectives, facts and ideologies and to challenge students to articulate their thoughts, justify and/or change their opinion, critically examining their own and others’ views and ideas.

Balanced and well-informed conversations

Beyond “there’s no right or wrong answer” sits the purpose of RE: through dialogue, students can begin to find their own voice and identity and develop their religious literacy, defined in the Norfolk Agreed Syllabus as ‘how well pupils are able to hold balanced and well-informed conversations about religion and worldviews².’ To hold these ‘balanced and well-informed conversations,’ and elevate learning in the RE classroom, student talk must be accountable – to knowledge, to reason and to the wider learning community³.

Effective talk in the classroom ought to be grounded in the conventions of a subject’s discipline, in order to promote that discipline’s ‘ways of thinking.’ If talk is both the process and product of learning, we need to teach students how to talk like subject specialists. In the case of RE this could mean speaking like a theologian, a philosopher, or a social scientist.

As Winter explains, the “need to induct students into the nuances of the disciplinary conversation ensures that [...RE] is not reduced to ‘an opinion-based subject’ but instead the academic, knowledge-based

2. Norfolk SACRE (2019). Norfolk Agreed Syllabus 2019. <https://www.schools.norfolk.gov.uk/article/29656/Religious-education-agreed-syllabus>
3. Resnick, Lauren & Asterhan, Christa & Clarke, Sherice. (2018). Accountable Talk: Instructional dialogue that builds the mind.

1. Luby, A. (2018). Dialogic Oracy for the 21st Century. Chartered College of teaching. https://my.chartered.college/impact_article/dialogic-re-oracy-for-the-21st-century/

aspect of the subject is recognised⁴.” In the topic of ‘the existence of God,’ for example, the ways of knowing, thinking, and talking will differ, depending on the discipline through which they are considering this question, as well as the inquiry question which is driving a particular discussion or lesson.

Discipline	Discussion question
Theology	How do Christians use sources of wisdom and authority to support the existence of God?
Philosophy	Analyse and evaluate the arguments for and against the existence of God.
Social Sciences	What can surveys about the existence of God tell us about theism in the UK/world today?

Instead of teaching that ‘there are no right or wrong answers in RE,’ disciplinary oracy provides students with a set of tools that they can use to look at an issue or a concept and critically engage with it, using RE’s unique ‘ways of thinking.’ This disciplinary knowledge helps students to make sense of (and therefore be accountable to) the substantive knowledge with which they engage.

Creating the conditions for rigorous dialogue

As well as being accountable to knowledge and reason, students must also be accountable to the learning community⁵. Talk is not a solo endeavour; to move every students’ thinking on, RE teachers must ensure that classroom talk adheres to certain norms. For example, do students listen attentively to each other? Do they build on the contributions of others and explain, justify or clarify their thinking? Do students welcome challenge and feel comfortable offering challenge to others’ ideas?

Discussion Guidelines or ‘rules for talk’ can help create a classroom culture for talk where all young people feel safe to articulate their emerging thoughts and views – even if they might not be ‘right,’ or they might differ to other peoples.’ Whilst these Guidelines are useful in any classroom, they are especially important for the RE classroom where the nature and

4. Ibid p 9
5. Ibid.

content of discussions may require extra sensitivity. In a classroom where students are accountable to their learning community you might also hear the teacher modelling authentic questions⁶, where there is no pre-specified answer – key to ensuring that all students’ opinions and experiences are valued. A teacher who asks authentic questions is genuinely asking students what they think; signalling that they expect everyone to have something interesting and valuable to say.

Conclusion

Dialogic talk is essential for elevating the quality and depth of learning in RE. By moving beyond the simplistic notion that “there are no right or wrong answers,” teachers of RE can foster a classroom environment where students engage critically and thoughtfully with complex and often controversial topics. As well as enhancing students’ knowledge and understanding, this approach also equips students with the skills they need to engage in respectful and reasoned discourse which is so important in today’s society.

6. Nystrand, Martin. (2006). Research on the Role of Classroom Discourse As It Affects Reading Comprehension. Research in the Teaching of English. 40. 392-412. 10.58680/rte20065107.

“As well as being accountable to knowledge and reason, students must also be accountable to the learning community.”

Grace Barron, Regional Programme Manager (South and Wales), Voice 21



Jennie Burbidge Talk for Learning

Oracy education can support metacognition and self-regulation

At Courthouse Green Primary School, oracy has been linked with a focus on developing students’ metacognitive skills. According to the EEF, “metacognition and self-regulation approaches to teaching support pupils to think about their own learning more explicitly, often by teaching them specific strategies for planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning¹.”

By linking this to oracy, Courthouse Green has developed the use of metacognitive talk, which empowers students to talk about *what* they learn as well as *how* they learn, improving their thinking and equipping them with the skills they need to become self-regulated learners.

Jennie Burbidge writes about the approach that Courthouse Green has taken to metacognitive talk.

Rationale for oracy

At Courthouse Green, we wanted to ensure all of our students were able to articulate their thinking and develop their understanding of key concepts through talk. To do this, we focused on ensuring all students were taught the oracy skills they needed to engage in talk for learning, including how to justify and explain their reasoning.

We have a high proportion of students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN). Through the explicit teaching, and modelling, of ‘metacognitive talk’ we hoped to empower these students to plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning, increasing their independence and confidence.

1. Education Endowment Foundation (2019). <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/metacognition>

“Metacognitive talk ... empowers students to talk about *what* they learn as well as *how* they learn.”



Changing practice

To better support our students to engage in talk for learning in the classroom, one of the first things that we did was to create ‘Oracy Contracts’ with our students. These are guidelines that students follow when engaging in classroom discussion. They are a combination of Thinking Moves², a set of strategies which support students to make strategic choices about how they process and evaluate their thinking and learning, and Voice 21’s Discussion Guidelines, which teach students how to engage in educationally productive classroom talk.

Oracy Contracts were created in collaboration with students, which has given them greater ownership over their learning and helped them to understand that what they have to say matters. Oracy Contracts are different in each year group, ensuring that they are appropriate for students of all ages.

To underpin our focus on ‘metacognitive talk’ and to put our Oracy Contracts into action, we have ensured that, in lessons across the curriculum, students have a range of opportunities to talk about, and develop, their learning, for example through structured discussion using strategies such as Concept Cartoons³ or fed-in facts⁴.

In maths, students are increasingly supported to engage in open-ended problem solving activities, through which they are prompted to verbalise their thinking and understanding. In our wider curriculum, students are provided with regular ‘think pieces’ which enable them to apply and consolidate their knowledge and understanding of a topic by unpicking a key stimulus through talk. To do this, students work in small groups and are encouraged to critically evaluate and challenge each others’ ideas.

2. DialogueWorks (2014). Thinking Moves. <https://dialogueworks.co.uk/thinking-moves/>
3. Keogh, B., & Naylor, S. (1999). Concept cartoons, teaching and learning in science: an evaluation. International Journal of Science Education, 21(4), 431–446. <https://doi.org/10.1080/095006999290642>
4. Gaunt, A., & Stott, A. (2019). Transform Teaching and Learning Through Talk. Rowman & Littlefield.

Listen and Look		Turn and look at the person talking and listen carefully.
Picture		Think carefully about the detail and vocabulary in our answers.
Explain		Explain what we mean and ask for another explanation when we are not sure.
Question		Ask question to deepen our understanding.
Justify		Give a reason to explain our opinions.
Weigh up		Think about and explore different opinions and points of view.
Respond		Agree, disagree and build on one another's answers respectfully.

Example Oracy Contract ▲ and think piece ▼

Year 4 - Sound

What can you observe? What questions do you want to ask?

Observing & Measuring
Using your knowledge to suggest what will happen in an enquiry.

Asking Questions
Asking questions that can be answered using a scientific enquiry.

I can see...

I wonder....

Explain

Picture

Question

Vocabulary
Volume
Variables
Increase
Decreases
Loud
Quiet

I can observe...
I wonder....

Impact

Linking oracy with metacognition has enabled students to take more responsibility for their learning, become more engaged, and better able to articulate their thoughts and ideas. We have also seen a difference in how our students, particularly those with SEND, articulate, critically reflect on and evaluate their learning.

An expectation that lessons across the curriculum provide opportunities for students to converse, share what they know and what they think is now well embedded across Courthouse Green. The quality of discussions that our students have with each other, staff members and external visitors indicate that they now have the tools to speak confidently across a range of contexts, to a number of different audiences.

By developing a whole-school approach to metacognitive talk, we have created a culture of oracy in which students expect to develop their thinking and articulate their learning through talk, helping them to feel that their voices are valued and heard.

Jennie Burbidge, Head of School and Oracy Lead, Courthouse Green Primary School



Oracy education improves analytical writing skills

Research question: To what extent does the explicit teaching of ‘build’ and ‘challenge’ talk tactics, implemented for six weeks, improve Year 10 pupil premium and disadvantaged students’ abilities to write analytically?



By Rahel Abebe

Introduction

This project aimed to address the disconnect between spoken language and written outcomes. My students excel at communicating through spoken language, but have struggled to communicate their ideas through writing.

I chose to focus on the attainment and achievement of 11 students receiving Pupil Premium funding in my class; this is a reflection of the wider student body, where 53% of students receive Pupil Premium funding.

Methods

I focused on teaching students to use the ‘build’ and ‘challenge’ talk tactics with the intention that they would engage more deeply with the topics that they were discussing, which would help them craft more detailed written work.

Prior to the intervention, I created a survey about students’ perceived confidence and abilities regarding their speaking and writing skills. A common trend across the class was that students felt more confident speaking about their ideas than they did writing about them.

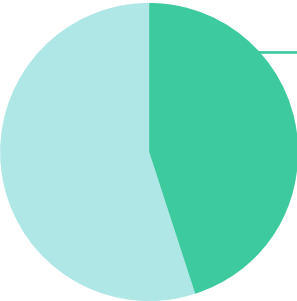
I also used students’ most recent school report data as a reference point for their progress, which is determined by the students’ written work. When grading their written work, I noticed that students often lacked depth in their responses and were sometimes unable to critically engage with the texts.

Findings

School report data

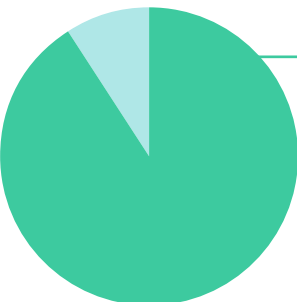
The school report data showed substantial improvement in my students’ writing skills.

Pre-intervention



45% of students achieved Grades 4-5

Post-intervention



91% of students achieved Grades 4-5



“Students who were usually reserved and quiet began volunteering their perspectives more frequently during lessons.”



Surveys

When comparing my baseline data to the final data from the questionnaire, the survey showed that students became even more positive about their speaking abilities.

When asked whether they were good writers (survey question: “I am a good writer”), students’ responses decreased slightly, while responses about their ability to write ideas down became more positive (survey question: “I am good at taking my ideas and writing them down in a clear way”). The results also indicated that students became more confident about writing, and also found it more enjoyable; and they perceived improvements in their capability of transitioning from speaking to writing.

The difference between decreased perceptions of improvement and higher actual improvement could be caused by different factors. This could be due to the intervention only running for six weeks and students needing more time and feedback to alter their initial perception of themselves as writers, or it could indicate that, while oracy is helpful for writing outcomes, students do not perceive it as such.

Conclusion

By the end of the project, most students were engaging in productive discussions. I noticed that students who were usually reserved and quiet began volunteering their perspectives more frequently during lessons. It was very rewarding to see students who previously needed prompting to share their ideas starting to be more vocal and active learners. On the whole, the response to the project was positive and the majority of students, even those who seemed less invested in the oracy tasks, improved their written expression and their grades in English.

Douglas Barnes Award
WINNER



Teaching discussion skills improves analytical writing

Research question: To what extent does the specific teaching of tier two vocabulary during an oracy lesson for 15 minutes per day, implemented for six weeks, improve the writing of Year 6 Jersey Premium pupils?



By Kate Burton

Introduction

Assessment using the Voice 21 Oracy Framework showed that development around the linguistic strand was required. I also felt that students’ writing outcomes would benefit from a deeper understanding of and ability to use tier two vocabulary (technical but not subject-specific words) in context.

The use of oracy strategies to help contextualise new vocabulary, linked with opportunities for dialogue and discussion, providing students with opportunity to hear and practise using new vocabulary in context, was the basis for my project. I decided to focus specifically on the acquisition of tier two vocabulary.

Method

I planned to teach a specific tier-two word during a 15-minute oracy lesson, four days a week, with a 15-minute consolidation lesson at the end of each week.

I selected the 14 students eligible for Pupil Premium in my class and conducted a survey with them at the end of the intervention about their attitudes towards new vocabulary and self-perception of their ability to learn and use new words.

I also chose two students from the group and analysed their writing before and after the intervention, looking specifically at the number of times that new vocabulary words were used accurately and in the correct context.

“93% of students felt that this intervention ‘improved’ or ‘greatly improved’ their vocabulary.”



Findings

Results from a questionnaire distributed to all students eligible for Pupil Premium at the end of the project showed that 93% of students felt that this intervention ‘improved’ or ‘greatly improved’ their vocabulary. Furthermore, 85% of students said taking part in the project ‘improved’ or ‘greatly improved’ their confidence in trying new vocabulary in their speaking and writing.

Analysis of writing tasks before and after the intervention demonstrated that students were more able to accurately use new vocabulary words in their writing than before the intervention. To do this, I looked specifically at the writing of two children, counting the number of times that they were able to use new vocabulary in a writing assignment.

Writing samples from two children showed improvement in the number of new vocabulary words that they were able to use correctly in their writing

	Pre-intervention correct vocabulary usage in writing sample	Post-intervention correct vocabulary usage in writing sample
Child A	###I	######II
Child B	##	#########

You can read more about an oracy-rich approach to teaching vocabulary in Voice 21’s practical, classroom-focused [report](#) on our research project ‘Voicing Vocabulary’.



Reflection

A key learning point from the project was the benefit of explicit teaching of tier two vocabulary across the curriculum using oracy-based activities to allow students to expand their vocabulary and deepen their understanding.

A secondary and unexpected outcome of this project was that students are now far more motivated to find, share and use high-quality vocabulary in their writing. This went further than just the specific vocabulary words: students were inspired by the rich vocabulary. They were determined to incorporate new words in everyday conversations as well as in their writing.

Moving forward, I plan to improve the teaching of vocabulary across the school through sharing research, and specific staff training. This project has demonstrated the positive impact explicit vocabulary teaching has on our students. Disseminating the principles of this project across year groups will support students, particularly those eligible for Pupil Premium, to develop their use of vocabulary through oracy.

This project will also contribute to a school-wide focus on using research projects to improve teaching and learning – an important part of our Jersey Premium strategy.

Conclusion

The children wanted to continue with the intervention after the six weeks and now regularly share new words with each other during writing lessons. They have been inspired to continue expanding their vocabulary and to improve their writing.

Douglas Barnes Award
**HIGHLY
COMMENDED**



Discussion guidelines improve turn-taking

Research question: To what extent does explicitly teaching discussion guidelines for four weeks improve students' ability to engage in turn taking?



By Vicki Page

Introduction

Before becoming a Voice 21 Oracy School, our school had undertaken many different initiatives to develop speaking and listening, but realised that we were focusing too heavily on the content of discussions and not enough on the practical, oracy skills required for students to engage in high-quality talk for learning.

As a result, we observed differences in the amount of input that different students were having in discussions: some were hugely talkative and often interrupted their peers while other students rarely contributed to discussion.

Methods

In order to improve turn-taking in my class, I worked collaboratively with my students to create classroom Discussion Guidelines. We discussed what oracy is and what their expectations are when having a conversation with peers. Their feedback was used to form a set of guidelines which provided all students with a shared understanding of expectations for talk in the classroom.

I chose a group of four students, two of whom were particularly talkative and two who were more reluctant to contribute to discussions. I set eight talk tasks that would be completed twice per week during the intervention.



During these tasks, I observed the focus students to measure their level of engagement by using the following metrics:

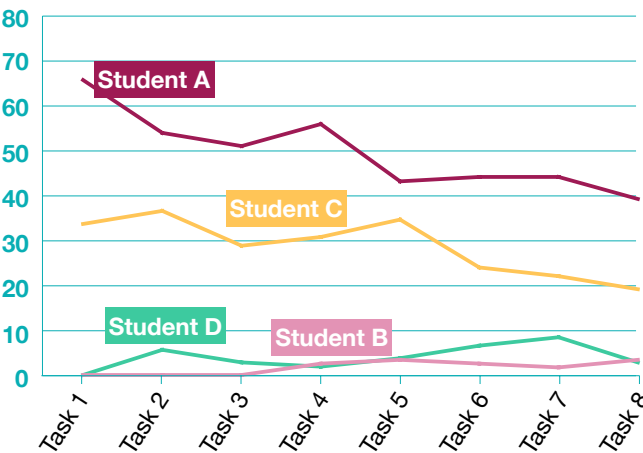
- The number of times the focus students interacted with others during the task
- The number of times the focus students interrupted others when they were talking

Findings

The talk tally showed that, at the end of the four week long intervention, the number of times that the focus students interacted with each other was more even across the four students.

The number of contributions made by students A and C, the more talkative students in the group decreased, while the contributions of student B and D, the quieter students, increased.

The number of contributions became more equal throughout the project



Conclusion

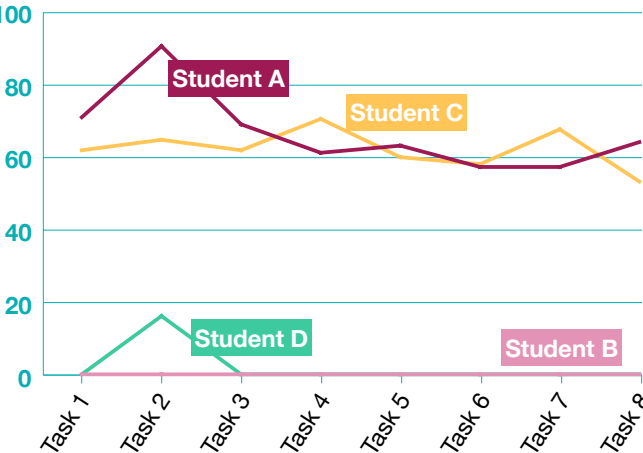
While the data does show improvement in the balance of contributions between students, the most notable change was harder to capture through data: a change in students' attitudes towards talk.

It was clear that the students were becoming more comfortable and confident during discussions as they regularly reminded one another of expectations using the Discussion Guidelines, including encouraging less confident speakers to contribute and reminding others of expectations around talk.

The discussions shifted from two students dominating and interrupting to all of the students attempting to collaboratively use exploratory talk to complete assigned talk tasks.

While the overall number of interruptions did decrease, the percentage of interactions that were interruptions was stable throughout the intervention. This indicated that, while the Discussion Guidelines were successful at improving the balance of contributions between the four students, they were less successful in decreasing the proportion of interruptions by more talkative students.

Percentage of interactions that were interruptions



“It was clear that the students were becoming more comfortable and confident during discussions.”



