Voice 21's Journal

The Talking Point

Summer 2025

Contents

Amy Gaunt

Introduction

At Voice 21, we are committed to supporting schools to enact a high-quality oracy education for all students. We see ourselves as the bridge between research and practice, translating rigorous, evidence-based insights into practical tools and strategies that teachers can use to bring oracy to life in their classrooms. Alongside this, we engage in research ourselves to better understand our impact and refine our approach, ensuring that our work with schools is both grounded in evidence and shaped by the realities of the classroom.

We also believe in the power of teacher-led research. Each year, teachers in Voice 21 Oracy Schools are invited to take part in the Douglas Barnes Award, named in honour of the pioneering researcher whose work highlighted the vital role of talk in young people's learning. This award recognises the powerful classroom research being undertaken across our network and provides a platform for teachers to share what they have learned about oracy in their specific contexts.

In this edition of The Talking Point, we've chosen to explore five different aspects of oracy education: the role of oracy in careers education, dialogic teaching, scaffolds for discussion, talk in the maths classroom and oracy for EAL learners. Each topic is explored through a theoretical lens, accompanied by a companion piece which examines how this theory can be brought to life in the classroom. By combining theory and practice in this way, we aim to offer a richer, more nuanced understanding of oracy education, as well as practical inspiration for how to develop it in your own school.

You'll find that each pair of articles is grouped under a Talking Point—a thought-provoking statement designed to spark discussion. Just as Talking Points are used in classrooms to promote purposeful, exploratory talk, we hope these articles prompt meaningful professional dialogue among colleagues. Whether you're a classroom teacher, a school leader, or someone involved in shaping school-wide strategy, we hope this journal offers valuable insights to support your oracy journey.

We are grateful to the many contributors—teachers, academics, and colleagues at Voice 21—who have generously shared their expertise and reflections in this year's journal. Their contributions not only further our collective understanding of oracy, but also showcase the thoughtful, varied approaches being taken to embed oracy education in schools across the country.

Thank you for taking the time to read and reflect. We hope this edition of The Talking Point leaves you inspired to continue developing oracy in your own context, equipped with fresh thinking and practical strategies to ensure all students benefit from a high-quality oracy education—one that enables them to thrive in school, work and life.

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

Professor Julia Snell

An introduction to dialogic teaching and learning

IN **THEORY**

Dialogic teaching and learning in theory

A strong consensus has emerged over five decades of research into classroom interaction. First, there is general concern with the dominance of traditional teacher-led talk, which typically follows a three-part structure: teachers initiate a topic, primarily by asking closed questions; pupils respond with brief answers; and teachers evaluate pupil responses.

This Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) cycle positions teachers (and textbooks) as the sole legitimate sources of knowledge. Pupils' main task is to recall and recite for evaluation what they have previously read or been told[1]. Consequently, IRE has been criticised as detrimental to pupils' independent thinking and learning.

Second, there is significant support for dialogic teaching and learning as an alternative. Dialogic approaches have grown out of the work of Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), a Russian psychologist who argued that thinking originates in social interaction — that talk between people becomes internalised as individual cognition. From this perspective, if we routinely push pupils to provide justification for their arguments, question assumptions and clarify concepts, they will internalise these processes as habitual ways of thinking. Talk is thus a powerful tool for learning and cognitive development, but it has to be the right kind of talk.

How does dialogic teaching and learning work in practice?

In dialogic classrooms, teachers elicit a range of pupil ideas, including those that are only half-formed or emerging, and in doing so, they bring multiple (and potentially conflicting) perspectives into play. Teachers probe pupil responses, pushing them to extend and clarify their thinking. In turn, pupils listen carefully to the teacher and to each other, and with their teacher's support, they build on, challenge or clarify others' claims and offer alternative explanations. Throughout, teachers and pupils remain committed to factual accuracy and to disciplinary standards, and they work hard to develop coherent lines of inquiry (see Sarah Michaels, Catherine O'Connor and Lauren Resnick on 'Accountable Talk' and Robin Alexander's principles of dialogic teaching).

Teachers thus need a repertoire of talk moves[2] that help children to articulate and deepen their reasoning, orient and listen to one another, and build on or critique each other's claims[3]. However, dialogue involves more than a shift in interactional style. Dialogue is a particular stance towards knowledge, one that is open to alternative perspectives and critique[4]. In dialogic classrooms, the thinking process is valued over a correctly stated "right" answer (Resnick et al. 2018). Dialogue is also a relation, based on mutual respect, inclusivity and solidarity (see Lefstein and Snell 2011 and 2014 on multiple dimensions of dialogue)[5]. These relational aspects are crucial to creating a 'safe space' within which pupils feel able to contribute. Within this safe

1. Lefstein, A and J. Snell. (2011). *Classroom discourse: The promise and complexity of dialogic practice*. In Sue Ellis and Elspeth McCartney (eds). Applied Linguistics and Primary School Teaching. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 165-185.

2. Michaels, S C., M. C. O'Connor, M. Williams Hall and L. B. Resnick. 2013. *Accountable Talk Sourcebook*. Institute of Learning, University of Pittsburgh.

3. Michaels, S. and Catherine O'Connor. (2015). *Conceptualizing talk moves as tools: Professional development approaches for academically productive discussions*. In Resnick et al (eds) Socializing intelligence through academic talk and dialogue. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association, 347-362.

4. ibid.

5. Lefstein, A. and J. Snell (2014). *Better than best practice: Developing teaching and learning through dialogue*. London: Routledge.

> Language variation is a resource that we can exploit as we make choices in interaction, not a problem to be eradicated

space, speakers must be able to elaborate their thinking using whatever language they find most comfortable[6]. For many, this will be their local dialect. For most, it will involve hesitation, half-formed statements and the occasional use of "like." When teachers create this environment, virtually all pupils participate[7,8].

What are the benefits of dialogic teaching and learning?

Schools under pressure to raise scores on standardised assessments may feel that they cannot devote time to developing classroom talk, but research has shown that dialogic approaches can enhance children's learning and raise achievement across the curriculum, including on standardised tests[9,10,11]. Some pupils retain this advantage for two to three years following a dialogic teaching intervention, and under certain conditions, they may transfer gains across academic domains[12]. For example, pupils who participate in dialogic teaching and learning in their science lessons do not only do better on standardised tests of science, but on tests of mathematics and English too[13,14]. This suggests that dialogic discussion can support the growth not only of specific disciplinary knowledge but also broader capacities to reason, process and solve new problems[15], which children can put to use in other subjects, and indeed, in other aspects of their lives. A large-scale dialogic teaching intervention across primary schools in England found that gains in mathematics achievement were greatest for students eligible for free school meals, thereby underlining the potential for dialogue to have a significant impact in underprivileged communities[16].

There are other benefits too. Pupils who experience dialogic teaching and learning will develop their oral language skills, gain confidence and build relationships (by becoming more patient and attuned to others' perspectives). They will develop argumentation and public speaking skills and come to understand norms of rational deliberation. Dialogue can also help to re-energise disengaged pupils and empower marginalised groups by affording young people the opportunity to make their voices heard[17].

6. Snell, J and I. Cushing. (2022). "A lot of them write how they speak": Policy, pedagogy, and the policing of 'nonstandard' English. 56(3): 199-211.

7. ibid.

8. Alexander, R. 2018. Developing dialogic teaching: genesis, process, trial. Research Papers in Education 33(5).

9. ibid

10. Howe, C., S. Hennessy, N. Mercer, M. Vrikki, and L. Wheatley. 2019. "Teacher–Student Dialogue During Classroom Teaching: Does It Really Impact on Student Outcomes?" Journal of the Learning Sciences 28(4–5), 462–512.

11. Resnick, L. B., C. Asterhan, and S. Clarke. (Eds.) (2015). Socializing intelligence through academic talk and dialogue. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.

12. Resnick, L. B., C. S. C. Asterhan, S. N. Clarke and F. Schantz. (2018). Next Generation Research in Dialogic Learning. In G. E. Hall, L. F. Quinn, & D. M. Gollnick (Eds.), The Wiley Handbook of Teaching and Learning. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 323–338.

13. Adey, P. and M. Shayer. 1993. An exploration of long-term far-transfer effects following an extended intervention programme in the high school science curriculum. Cognition and Instruction 11: 1-29.

14. ibid.

15. Resnick, L. B., C. S. C. Asterhan, S. N. Clarke and F. Schantz. (2018). Next Generation Research in Dialogic Learning. In G. E. Hall, L. F. Quinn, & D. M. Gollnick (Eds.), The Wiley Handbook of Teaching and Learning. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 323–338.

16. ibid.

17. Lefstein, A. and J. Snell (2014). Better than best practice: Developing teaching and learning through dialogue. London: Routledge.

What are the barriers to dialogic teaching and learning?

Several challenges confront teachers who want to foster dialogic talk in their classrooms. First, competing with the proven benefits of dialogue are demands for teachers and pupils to speak in ways deemed to conform to "standard English." Here, it is taken for granted that there is a "correct" way to speak as well as write, which leads to overt correction of pupils' spoken language and other modes of language policing that inhibit dialogue[18]. These ideas are institutionalised and reproduced in Ofsted reporting and other policy mechanisms[19]. In contrast, in a dialogic classroom, teachers and pupils understand that speech is situated within specific contexts and interactions, and thus what counts as "good", "standard" or "acceptable" spoken language will vary from one situation to the next, between different groups of speakers, and over time. Language variation is a resource that we can exploit as we make choices in interaction, not a problem to be eradicated[20,21].

Second, teachers' perceptions of pupils (and pupils' perceptions of themselves) can be a barrier to dialogue. Research has shown that teachers often believe that only some pupils – the high achievers and those from privileged social backgrounds – are capable of participating effectively in dialogic discussion, and this has an impact on the questions they ask and the level of structure and control they apply[22]. The result is that dialogic teaching is often limited to pupils who are high achieving and/or already advantaged by the education system, even though we know that all pupils can benefit from dialogue.

Finally, dialogic teaching and learning requires a skilled teacher who is able to use their professional judgement to balance different dimensions of dialogue – productive talk moves, robust but respectful critique, and relations of solidarity – from one classroom context to the next. There is no "best practice" approach[23]. These skills can be honed through guided reflection on video recordings of real classroom practice (as advocated in Lefstein and Snell 2014). Dialogue thus requires investment in teacher professional development.

18. Snell, J and I. Cushing. (2022). "A lot of them write how they speak": Policy, pedagogy, and the policing of 'nonstandard' English. 56(3): 199-211.

19. Cushing, I. and J. Snell (2023). The (white) ears of Ofsted: a raciolinguistic perspective on the listening practices of the schools inspectorate. Language in Society. 52(3): 363-386.

20. Snell, J. (2024a). Non-standard English and Education. In S. Fox (ed). Language in Britain and Ireland. Cambridge: CUP, 543-567.

21. Snell, J (2013) Dialect, interaction and class positioning at school: from deficit to difference to repertoire. Language and Education, 27 (2). 110-128. ISSN 0950-0782

22. Snell, J. and A. Lefstein. (2018). "Low Ability", participation and identity in dialogic pedagogy. American Educational Research Journal. 55(1): 40-78.

23. Lefstein, A. and J. Snell (2014). Better than best practice: Developing teaching and learning through dialogue. London: Routledge.

> Pupils who experience dialogic teaching and learning will develop their oral language skills, gain confidence and build relationships (by becoming more patient and attuned to others' perspectives)

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Dialogic classrooms in action: a case study in Year 8 Geography

IN **PRACTICE**

It's a year 8 geography lesson and there is a lively discussion underway about which of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals should take priority.

"I've put quality of education because I reckon if you've got pretty good education and all them children get, like, decent and good jobs, it increases the GDP of the country or the GDP per capita,"

The teacher encourages the student to elaborate on what the impact of this might be in the future before inviting another student to respond.

"Go on Lennon, are we challenging or building?"

Lennon responds. "I'm challenging education. Education is really important and it is high up on my list but I think clean water and zero hunger is more important because without them you won't be able to live a healthy life. You wouldn't really be able to go to school if you've got diseases"

The teacher nods thoughtfully. "So you're linking that one and saying, if they've not got those things they can't even go to school. I like that argument."

The discussion continues. Students use their prior knowledge as well as growing understanding of the Sustainable Development Goals to form reasoned arguments, responding to each other's points and sharing their emerging thinking. The teacher summarises students' arguments and encourages them to develop or extend their ideas, using prompts such as: 'What else could it lead to? Build on that.'

To prepare students to engage in this discussion, the teacher introduced clear expectations.

"You're going to be telling me and persuading me why you are correct. But other people are going to be challenging you. You might ask someone to clarify. Are you saying that this is more important because…? Or you might build on their idea."

Throughout the teacher listens intently, occasionally encouraging students to use more precise language to explain their ideas.

"Replace stuff for me."

"The economy and like what they've got," interjects another student.

Importantly, students are free to share tentative or developing ideas, often pausing and using fillers such as 'like' and 'erm' as they shape their thoughts. Peers sometimes interject to support or clarify one another's points, creating a collaborative, supportive environment. The teacher listens closely but avoids correcting students' use of 'non-standard English', recognising that in this context, talk is a tool for thinking. This enables students to explore complex ideas uninterrupted and without worrying about form, fostering richer dialogue and deeper understanding.

Creating dialogic moments like this in the classroom requires skill on the part of the teacher. They must be able to prompt and guide discussion which enables students to explore and develop their ideas whilst furthering the learning goals of their subject. This involves explicitly teaching oracy skills and establishing clear norms for classroom dialogue. Voice 21's Oracy Benchmarks (2019) provide a useful framework to consider how to do this in practice.

Benchmark 1: Sets high expectations for oracy

Here, setting high expectations for oracy does not mean insisting on the exclusive use of full sentences or standard English. Instead, it reflects the belief that all students, regardless of background or prior attainment, are capable of participating meaningfully in classroom dialogue. In this lesson, high expectations were evident in the decision to dedicate a substantial part of the lesson to student-led discussion. The teacher established clear expectations for this and provided scaffolding, including Voice 21's Talk Tactics, which equipped students with prompts to engage with one another's ideas.

Benchmark 2: Values every voice

In this classroom, participation is high, and every student is encouraged to share their thinking, knowing their contributions will be heard and respected. The teacher listens carefully and supports all learners to extend and refine their ideas. Rather than seeking a single 'correct' answer, he is genuinely interested in students' perspectives and the reasoning behind them. This approach fosters a sense of shared intellectual endeavour, where understanding is built collaboratively. All students are included, and every voice contributes to the learning process.

Benchmark 3: Teaches oracy explicitly

Although the primary aim of the lesson is to develop students' understanding of the Sustainable Development Goals, it is clear that oracy has been explicitly taught to enable this learning.

Students confidently use sentence stems to structure their responses—for example, to challenge, build upon, or clarify a peer's point—demonstrating familiarity with the features of productive dialogue. Norms such as active listening, taking turns, and engaging respectfully with differing viewpoints have been clearly established through explicit teaching.

"Peers sometimes interject to support or clarify one another's points, creating a collaborative, supportive environment

Benchmark 4: Harnesses oracy to elevate learning

Oracy is integrated into the lesson as a tool to deepen students' geographical knowledge and understanding. Through extended, whole-class discussion, students are supported to make connections between different Sustainable Development Goals, draw on relevant prior knowledge and articulate cause-and-effect relationships. The teacher's prompts guide students to adopt the language and habits of disciplinary thinking. Through talk, students are supported to think geographically.

Benchmark 5: Appraises progress in oracy

Throughout the lesson, the teacher actively appraises students' use of oracy to monitor both their geographical understanding and their development as speakers and listeners. By listening carefully to students' responses and the clarity of their reasoning, the teacher is able to offer in-the-moment feedback, prompting students to elaborate, clarify, or use more precise geographical terminology.

This lesson shows how the Voice 21 Oracy Benchmarks can support teachers to effectively implement dialogic approaches to teaching and learning. You can find the Oracy Benchmarks here.

Jane Hawkins

Oracy supports learning in maths

IN **THEORY**

When visiting classrooms that are rich in dialogue, I often hear teachers remark, "*My students could never talk like that.*" This common reaction raises an important question: what support do teachers of maths need to help students develop disciplinary oracy – the ability to articulate ideas, develop understanding and reason effectively through speaking, listening and communication in maths?

In this article, I explore three interrelated elements that underpin effective approaches to oracy in the maths classroom: **sequencing talk opportunities**, **building a culture of dialogue**, and **designing purposeful talk tasks**.

1. Sequencing talk in maths

Building students' confidence to engage in mathematical talk doesn't happen by accident. It requires intentional planning and a thoughtful progression of opportunities for them to articulate their thinking and understanding. Askew[1] suggests a conversational approach to mathematics talk, with a focus on listening as well as talking:

- **Private talk** — low stakes discussion with a peer, which provides a safer space to rehearse and refine ideas.
- **Public conversation** — whole-class dialogue where ideas are shared, developed and challenged collectively.

A well-known example of this progression is the classic think-pair-share: students are given time to think individually, then discuss with a partner, and finally share their ideas with the class. While many teachers use this technique, its power lies in its purposeful implementation, ensuring that students have opportunities to develop, consolidate and articulate their mathematical knowledge and understanding through speaking and listening in different contexts.

1. Mike Askew, King's College London. http://mikeaskew.net/page3/page5/files/Privatetalkpublicconverse.pdf

2. Building a culture of talk

More talk in the maths classroom isn't inherently better. For talk to strengthen students' subject knowledge, it needs to be deliberate, focused, and developmental, enabling students to build a deep and connected understanding of the maths they are learning. At the heart of this is a classroom culture where all contributions are valued—not just because they are 'correct' but because they provide insights into students' mathematical thinking.

An example of how this might manifest is when teachers are listening *to* pupil responses rather than *for* a particular answer. The teacher is actively listening, seeking to understand pupils' conceptions of maths, so that they can adapt their teaching and build on students' prior learning.

A helpful model to support this practice is Stein et al.'s (2008) *Five Practices for Orchestrating Productive Mathematical Discussions*[2]:

- **Anticipating**: Considering possible student responses to a task in advance, including misconceptions.
- **Monitoring:** Observing and listening during discussions to gather insights into student thinking.
- **Selecting:** Choosing particular responses to bring into public discussion based on the learning goals.

2. Stein, M. K., Engle, R. A., Smith, M. S., & Hughes, E. K. (2008). *Orchestrating Productive Mathematical Discussions: Five Practices for Helping Teachers Move Beyond Show and Tell.* Mathematical Thinking and Learning, 10(4), 313–340.

> "The most joyful moments often arise when students themselves make the connections—when one idea sparks another, when disagreement prompts clarification, when the intended learning goal is illuminated through the interplay of student voices

- **Sequencing:** Ordering selected responses to build a coherent sequence of learning.
- **Connecting:** Helping students link different approaches and ideas to deepen understanding.

These practices provide structure without needing to script a lesson, enabling teachers to remain responsive. They allow space for students to shape the direction of the discussion while ensuring that key mathematical ideas are surfaced.

There is, of course, a tension here: while we aim to listen openly, the practices of selecting and sequencing inevitably involve listening *for* responses that move learning forward. This is a nuanced balancing act—one that improves with experience and reflection.

3. Designing effective talk tasks

An oracy-rich classroom doesn't emerge simply from good intentions or better questioning — it requires thoughtful task design. If we want students to talk mathematically, we need to give them something mathematically worthwhile to talk about.

This means designing or adapting tasks that go beyond ticking off curriculum content. Rich talk tasks invite genuine thinking, multiple strategies, and opportunities for reasoning and justification. For instance, presenting a problem with multiple entry points or deliberately including a common misconception can prompt debate and discussion.

However, even the most carefully crafted task won't lead to productive talk without:

- A shared understanding of the purpose of talk,
- Explicit norms around respectful dialogue,
- A belief (by both teacher and students) that every contribution has value.

In classrooms where these elements are in place, teachers use talk to surface and build on students' prior knowledge. They don't ask questions just to steer students toward a predetermined answer. Too many lessons resemble a "guess what's in my head" game[3], where increasingly narrow questions eventually funnel students to the right answer—but not to understanding.

Instead, questioning should reflect genuine curiosity about *how* students are thinking. This shift moves us away from "funneling" (where the teacher does most of the thinking) and towards *feeling the weight* of student reasoning.

The most joyful moments often arise when students themselves make the connections—when one idea sparks another, when disagreement prompts clarification, when the intended learning goal is illuminated through the interplay of student voices. These moments feel like the crescendo in a piece of music or the punch line in a joke, when the classroom experiences, designed, constructed, and coordinated by the teacher, illuminate the intended object of learning

The effective use of oracy to deepen learning in the maths classroom is both an art and a skill — but it is one I have seen brought to life in real classrooms in schools across England. It is a skill that teachers *can* develop and that they *should* be empowered to master.

Jane Hawkins, NCETM

3. Mason, J., Burton, L., & Stacey, K. (2010). Thinking Mathematically. Dorchester: Prentice Hall.)

Kathleen McBride

IN **PRACTICE**

Supporting students to build mathematical confidence through talk

The relationship between oracy education and improved confidence in mathematics is increasingly evident in Voice 21 Oracy Schools.

This year, we've been visiting schools — speaking with teachers and shadowing lessons to learn more about how oracy supports students' reasoning, problem solving and mathematical fluency.

St Thomas' Church of England Primary School in Blackburn has placed oracy at the heart of its curriculum. The impact of oracy in maths, where students regularly engage in rich whole-class and peer-to-peer dialogue, has been particularly evident. We spent the day with Oracy Lead, Samantha Priestley, who outlined the steps the school has taken to harness oracy for learning in maths.

Developing a talk-first approach

At St Thomas', teachers follow a mastery approach and lessons tend to open with a problem-solving task where students will talk through their ideas, challenge one another and clarify their own thinking before anything goes in their books.

"It's rare now that a lesson doesn't start this way. We're not focusing on pages and pages of work — it's the quality of discussion that we're most interested in."

Teachers have noticed that the quality of what is written in books following whole-class or group discussion is much higher.

Supporting extended dialogue

Simple shifts in how teachers structure talk in the classroom have led to students expanding their ideas and sharing more of their reasoning in discussions with peers. For example, by moving from talk partners to trios for talk, students encounter more ideas and different perspectives that in turn invite greater opportunities to hear others' thinking — while developing their own. Over time, teachers build more complexity into these discussions — expecting students to not just agree, but to challenge, probe and summarise their group's ideas too.

Building independence

Routines for talk in maths are embedded across year groups meaning that by the time students reach Key Stage 2, they already know how to engage in purposeful dialogue.

As students progress through school "teachers find that they're doing less of the talking in class and that students are doing more of that critical thinking together."

Teachers also think carefully about what to scaffold and when so that students have tools for mathematical talk when they need them. The school recognises that whilst scaffolds can be particularly helpful for students who have SEND or who speak English as an additional language, it's important that students aren't restricted in how they choose to communicate those early ideas.

> Teachers have noticed that the quality of what is written in books following whole-class or group discussion is much higher.

In a Year 5 lesson, we heard the teacher say "it's OK to drop the scaffold.' and 'forget your discussion roles for a second, let's all think about this for a moment." signalling the value of flexibility and encouraging students' own ways of expression.

At St Paul's Catholic High School in Manchester, teachers have begun integrating structured talk opportunities into lessons to deepen conceptual understanding and to foster a more collaborative approach to learning. During a visit to St Paul's, William Hedge (Acting Head of Maths) shared the school's approach to developing purposeful talk in maths.

Anchoring talk in engaging tasks

Maths teachers in the school noticed that students were struggling to articulate mathematical ideas and began to use anchor tasks at the beginning of lessons. These open-ended problems provide authentic opportunities for exploratory talk; the kind of low-floor high-ceiling challenges that create the space for students to notice patterns, make connections between previous and new learning and listen to different perspectives on how to solve them.

Through these activities, students are able to communicate their mathematical thinking processes in a low-stakes way and, since adopting this approach, the team has noticed that students are far more willing to share ideas, take risks, and challenge each other's thinking.

"In these tasks, we encourage students to think about all the different problem solving elements they can use. Ultimately, we're teaching students to express themselves in these problems — the more they lose themselves in them, talk to their peers and enjoy the process — the more learning will happen."

Teachers identify that some of the most powerful moments in these lessons occur when students express ideas that they weren't anticipating. In Katherine Smith's Year 7 maths lesson, she responded to a student's idea saying: "I've never thought about it in that way." creating a sense of shared learning and curiosity — not just between peers but between teachers and students alike.

Scaffolding mathematical talk

Scaffolds that support exploratory talk promote inclusion and enable students to participate more actively in lessons. At St Paul's, teachers use scaffolds such as sentence starters to support reasoning and Talk Tactics to prompt students to ask probing questions — something teachers have noticed students often don't instinctively do.

Modelling is also key; teachers walk students through their own thinking processes, teaching them the metacognitive skills that develop greater independence with problem solving.

"We're not just pouring information into the students, we're teaching them to think mathematically by encouraging them to speak mathematically."

Supporting assessment for learning

Oracy also plays a crucial role in assessment for learning. When students explain their reasoning aloud and test out mathematical vocabulary, teachers gain valuable insights into their understanding and misconceptions. This allows for real-time intervention and clarification, often before misunderstandings are entrenched.

An increasing number of both primary and secondary schools are placing oracy at the heart of maths education, exploring what it means to create a positive and inclusive culture of talk in maths lessons and connecting oracy to disciplinary skills to support learning, attainment and — crucially — enjoyment of the subject at every key stage.

Kathleen McBride, Voice 21

Glynis Lloyd

IN **THEORY**

Oracy education is an important opportunity for EAL learners

With more than one in five learners in schools identified as using English as an additional language (EAL), multilingual classrooms are the norm in England. The recent focus on oracy, including the work of the Commission on the Future of Oracy Education in England[1], provides an exciting opportunity for schools to consider the opportunities for multilingual learners to develop their oracy in English and in all the languages they use. What do schools need to consider?

Multilingualism is an asset

Multilingual children who are learning English as an additional language bring valuable language knowledge to the learning of their new language. They have already acquired knowledge of the sounds, vocabulary, and grammar of their home language(s) and learnt how to use it in different contexts, with different audiences and for different purposes.

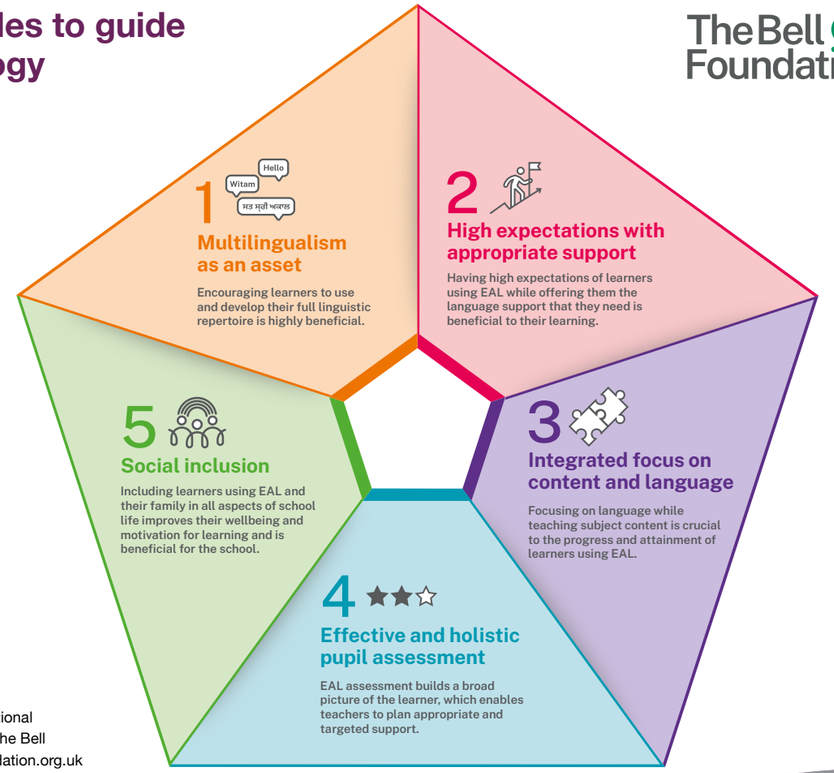
Multilingual children can transfer this language knowledge to the learning of English[2]. This transfer of skills, including oracy skills, is exemplified in the work of the researcher, Jean Conteh[3], which showed how learning is an active and dynamic process, and how learning can happen when children are encouraged to draw on their full linguistic repertoire. Jim Cummins' work has shown that to best enable that transfer, multilingual children benefit most where they continue to develop literacy and language learning in their home language[4]. More recent research shows that children who continue to learn and use the languages they speak at home, develop a range of cognitive advantages[5]: developing metalinguistic awareness, as they compare the ways different languages work, and can see 'literacies as systems[6].'

> "Research shows that children who continue to learn and use the languages they speak at home, develop a range of cognitive advantages

1. Oracy Education Commission (2024) We need to talk Report. We need to talk, 2024 – Oracy Commission
2. Effective Teaching of EAL Learners — The Bell Foundation
3. Conteh, J (2023) 'The EAL Teaching Book: Promoting success for multilingual learners. London. Sage Publishers.
4. Cummins, J. (1991) Interdependence of First and Second Language Proficiency in Bilingual Children. In Bialystok, E. (ed) *Language Processing in in Bilingual Children*. Cambridge: Cambridge: University Press.
5. Woll, B. and Li Wei (2019) *The Cognitive Benefits of Language Learning Report*. The Cognitive Benefits of Language Learning | The British Academy
6. Edwards, V. (2009) *Learning to be Literate, Multilingual Perspectives*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Five principles to guide EAL pedagogy

The Bell Foundation



How bilingualism works

Effective bilinguals/multilinguals move between languages as they negotiate meaning in their new language. Despite prevalent myths about languages as 'discrete systems,' these practices are not confusing for multilinguals, who are able to productively harness all the language knowledge they have, their 'full linguistic repertoire,' as they listen and talk and make sense of the requirements for different registers and discourses in different contexts.

This practice of 'translanguaging'[7] can be productively harnessed by teachers, who recognise the resources that multilingual learners bring to their learning, as they create spaces in their lessons for all the languages their learners use.

7. Garcia, O. (2013). Theorizing Translanguaging for Educators. In C. Celic, K. Seltzer, & L. Ascenzi-Moreno (Eds.), *Translanguaging: A CUNY-NYSIEB guide for educators* (2nd. Ed.): 1-6. The Graduate Centre at The City University of New York. And Hillcrest, D. (2021). Academic benefits of translanguaging. MinneTESOLJournal, 37(2).

Multilingual learners need adaptive teaching

Recognising the solid foundation that using another language brings, teachers can then consider the language support that learners acquiring English need, to build on that foundation.

- In literacy learning, research shows that "…[R]eading books and stories aloud and being encouraged to have conversations about them with their teacher and peers … improves reading comprehension[8]." These important conversations about books can build communicative ability: in these conversations, children learn important communication skills, such as turn taking, listening to the views and ideas of others, and formulating their own ideas and opinions.
- For learners who are new to English, or in the early acquisition stages, reading in their home or preferred language can provide safe and comforting spaces to find their voice. "There are huge benefits to reading with the children in their home language. It helps to support their transition into school; increases their confidence; allows them to share their thinking and ideas and increases their engagement[9].
- Learners who use EAL need scaffolding strategies[10] that provide first steps for constructing spoken English. Strategies such as substitution tables (with the aid of visuals for those new to English), sentence starters and prompts help learners to construct grammatically accurate and contextually appropriate responses.
- Where multilingual learners are new to the English education system, they may need support adjusting to curriculum demands to express their own ideas and opinions, and personal responses to texts, if their previous learning has been marked by a more teacher-centred pedagogy.
- Evidence is emerging from The Talk-Rich Teaching project[11] that when teachers talk less, children talk more and learn more in the process. A focus on oracy development provides an opportunity for teachers to examine how much space their talking occupies in lessons, and what might be gained by creating more opportunities for multilingual learners to talk.
- Learners acquiring English need time and safe spaces to process their thoughts, practise what they want to say and prepare to speak in English. Pair and group work that is planned and part of lessons every day, can afford this support. Pairs who share the same language background can provide supportive contexts, where knowledge is developed as a dialogue, as children draw on the language they know and translate that into English.

Make space for all languages and ways of speaking English

Where children encounter their home language at school, through storytelling, discussions about texts, and pair and group dialogue, in ways that elevate and value their language, they feel seen: a crucial part of their identity, the language they speak, is affirmed.

Creating spaces for storytelling and role play activities in the languages that learners feel comfortable using, is another strategy teachers can use to make sure that multilingual learners have opportunities to participate as equals.

Learners who use EAL also need exposure to a wide range of ways of speaking in English, for academic study, for strengthening social connections, and for developing an appreciation of the richness of English language diversity.

Conclusion

Recognising the strengths and advantages of multilingualism and providing language support for learning English, opens the way for multilingual learners to find and use their voice as equals among their peers.

Glynis Lloyd,
The Bell Foundation

8. Education Endowment Foundation (2020) *Improving Literacy in Key Stage 1.* d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net/production/eef-guidance-reports/literacy-ks-1/Literacy_KS1_Guidance_Report_2020.pdf

9. Raluca Belea, St Bernadette's School, Harrow.

10. Gibbons, P. (2002). *Scaffolding Language Scaffolding Learning. Teaching Second Language learners in the Mainstream Classroom*. Portsmouth. Heinemann.

11. Flynn, N et al (0ngoing). The Talk-Rich Teaching project. University of Reading. The Talk Rich Teaching Project.

Katy Wan and Rebekah Simon-Caffyn

How Voice 21 Oracy Schools are using oracy to support EAL learners

IN **PRACTICE**

Introduction

In Voice 21 Oracy Schools, we know that learning English as an additional language — being or becoming multilingual — is an asset to learners, not a deficit. We know that many of our schools are pioneering approaches to supporting EAL learners to develop their speaking, listening and communication skills through oracy education.

This article will highlight the practice of Voice 21 Oracy Schools, showing how schools have taken a whole-school approach to oracy and EAL, and some of the specific strategies that schools have used to create inclusive environments for these learners.

A whole-school approach to oracy supports EAL learners

A key means of supporting EAL learners through oracy is to have an inclusive approach across the whole school. Voice 21 Oracy Schools have done this by celebrating all languages and cultural identities and creating an environment where learners understand that all voices are valued. This promotes a culture of social acceptance and social inclusion, and ensures that EAL learners are included in both their classrooms and in the wider school.

1. Creating a positive and inclusive school culture

Grove Street Primary School's sustained focus on maintaining an inclusive school culture has supported their growing numbers of EAL learners.

> It's taken a really long time to create a real positive culture that accepts everybody no matter what. The culture is really inclusive of our EAL learners, and we try to ensure that we celebrate every student and their identity.
>
> CHARLIE WALSH, ASSISTANT HEADTEACHER AND ORACY LEAD

This culture of inclusion enables Grove Street to support students to learn at their own pace in an environment where they feel listened to, and where listening and non-verbal interactions are valued.

Recently, Grove Street had a new student who had just arrived from Ukraine. Before she started at the school, the whole class learned how to say hello in Ukrainian, so that when she walked into the classroom for the first time, she would feel welcomed and included.

> Her parents were quite emotional about it, but this is the kind of thing that we do for everyone in the school community. It's not just about teaching the children, it is also about bringing the community in and bringing everyone along on this journey of inclusion and acceptance.
>
> CHARLIE WALSH

> In Voice 21 Oracy Schools, teachers support their EAL learners to participate in class by creating environments where everyone works together to co-construct knowledge and where the emphasis is on speaking and engaging in lessons, not getting the right answer the first time.

Mount Pleasant Junior School uses Welcoming Committees to support students who are new to the school, and show that multilingualism is recognised as an asset that plays an essential role in school life. The Welcoming Committees support other students who are learning English, both during lessons and in break times. The members of the Welcoming Committees wear badges that show which languages they speak, and engage with other EAL learners in both their home languages and in English.

2. Creating an oracy-rich curriculum to support EAL learners

At Hazelbury Primary School, explicit teaching of oracy skills needed for different contexts and varied audiences are built in throughout the curriculum. This helps the school ensure that students have the talk strategies to ensure future success in school and beyond. Children work towards building solid foundations in both their preferred languages and in English by using talk to explore and develop their ideas; students are given the opportunities to engage in exploratory talk in every lesson.

Grove Street uses oracy assemblies to expose students to different languages, accents and dialects by sharing different texts and welcoming guest speakers. “We applied the ‘Windows, Mirrors and Sliding Glass Doors’ philosophy in resources and texts – children should see themselves represented and experience the lives of others, whilst also having new worlds opened to them.”

2. Using classroom practice to support EAL learners

Creating an inclusive classroom where English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners feel welcomed and able to participate fully requires thoughtful planning and deliberate support. Teachers support their EAL learners to participate in class by creating environments where everyone works together to co-construct knowledge and where the emphasis is on speaking and engaging in lessons, not simply getting the ‘right’ answer. Key to this is ensuring that students understand expectations for talk in this context and that effective scaffolding is in place to help them access learning and engage in classroom dialogue.

Set high expectations for talk…

At Mount Pleasant Junior School, the school uses an Oracy Charter, which maps out the progression of each strand of the Oracy Framework, and what the expectations are when students are “getting started,” “making headway,” and “aiming high.” Teachers use these to identify and teach the oracy skils students need to engage in talk for learning and develop a shared language for oracy in their classrooms. .

At Saltley Academy, the expectation is that all students have valuable contributions to make to classrooom discussion.Texts are used as engaging stimuli for talk, enabling students to draw on the wide knowledge base that exists in a diverse classroom. As a result, all students, including EAL learners, have the opportunity to participate in authentic discussion of salient issues that are relevant to their lives.

…whilst providing appropriate scaffolds

In a primary context, Mount Pleasant Junior School ensures that EAL learners are supported to use key vocabulary.

> We use a lot of word banks to support those children who are new to English, so we use something called a widget, which generates icons to go with the text, so that children can see visually what words actually mean.
>
> CHARMAINE AUCKBURALLY, ORACY LEAD, MOUNT PLEASANT JUNIOR SCHOOL

…and creating opportunities for translanguaging

Translanguaging practice allows students to use their full linguistic repertoires by encouraging multilingual communication. Translanguaging in oracy activities ensures that students are empowered to harness their prior knowledge and experiences when developing their proficiency in English.

Westgate Hill Primary School has focused specifically on using trio groupings to support EAL learners. Students are grouped strategically, ensuring that there are students who speak the same home language and students with different English levels in each group so that they can offer support to newer English learners.

> Opportunities to learn to and through talk can help promote an environment of belonging and acceptance both in classrooms and across the school.

> I find it an effective way of being inclusive to all of our learners. Children get really excited, especially our newer English learners, when they have the chance to speak their home languages in the classroom.
>
> SORREL PRICE, ORACY CHAMPION

At Grove Street Primary, teachers are deeply aware that the onus to understand and communicate with children falls to the teachers, not the children.

> We had a girl with very low prior-attainment who was really struggling with her writing in English, but we realised that she was a really beautiful writer in her own language. We used Google Translate and got to read pages of her really inspiring work. Among staff, there’s a real understanding that it’s our job to figure out how to understand, and that it’s up to the children to communicate in whatever way suits them.
>
> CHARLIE WALSH

Conclusion

A high-quality oracy education is vital to support EAL learners. Opportunities to learn to and through talk can help promote an environment of belonging and acceptance both in classrooms and across the school. Oracy is an important part of creating inclusive schools and classrooms where all cultural and linguistic backgrounds are valued and respected, so that EAL learners develop the sense of belonging they need to thrive at school.

Katy Wan and Rebekah Simon-Caffyn, Voice 21

Nicola Hall

IN **THEORY**

Talk paves the way for tomorrow's careers

Every time a young person steps into an interview room or team meeting, what do they really bring with them? Beyond their CV and grades, it's their power to speak up—with clarity, confidence and purpose—that often makes all the difference. Yet, for many, that spark of oracy still feels out of reach.

The old-school skill that still rules

Yes, the rise of AI and automation has everyone chasing the "next big thing" in digital skills. But here's the surprising truth: employers today, from boutique startups to global construction firms, keep telling us the basics really matter. English, maths—and above all, the ability to articulate ideas and communicate well—remain non-negotiable skills vital to securing roles.

That demand is crystal clear: young people need more than technical know-how. They need the confidence to speak up and be heard, and in the age-old knowledge/skills debate, thankfully, the skill of oracy is a valued condition for success in the classroom.

Confidence still falls flat

The Careers and Enterprise Company's study of over 230,000 young people, which measures career readiness, saw an encouraging uptick in self-belief across most workplace skills—except for speaking. By Year 11, many youngsters still baulk at the thought of a presentation or interview. Girls from less advantaged backgrounds report the lowest levels of confidence in speaking. It's not that they don't see the value—almost every young person we speak to knows how crucial oracy is. It's that without real practice and feedback, nerves take over. How do we work through this gap?

Bringing the real world into the classroom

Employers tend to notice the oracy confidence gap during interview and assessment processes. Data from over 1000 businesses who work with us to improve their school outreach efforts suggests employers struggle to help young people with interview preparation. Around 40% of Year 11s report they don't feel ready either.

Imagine replacing the classic "mock interview" with a live brief from a local employer. Frame the task with clear prompts ("pitch a new product idea in two minutes"), then sit back as students receive instant coaching on tone, structure, and body language.

That's exactly what companies like Mace Group are doing. Their modern work experience opportunities pair students with project managers to tackle genuine site-planning challenges and build real-life skills. Teachers get upskilled, too—through hands-on teacher encounters where they learn to weave authentic workplace scenarios into daily lessons.

And parents aren't left out: Mace hosts and attends evenings in local schools to demystify their industry, show career pathways, and share online toolkits so students can keep practising at home.

> "The Careers and Enterprise Company's study of over 230,000 young people, which measures career readiness, saw an encouraging uptick in self-belief across most workplace skills—except for speaking.

Work experience—more than just a taster

With government plans developing for a guarantee of two weeks' worth of quality work experience to be accessible to every young person [ST1] [NH2] , we've piloted a multi-experience model that treats each placement as a building block. One experience might be on a shop floor, the next shadowing a marketing team, followed by a reflective workshop, layering opportunities to access different workplaces.

By the end, students have explored sectors and sharpened core skills—team talk, client pitches, and problem-solving huddles—all under the guidance of industry mentors. That iterative feedback loop is exactly what turns timid speakers into confident communicators.

> "Data from over 1000 businesses who work with us to improve their school outreach efforts suggests employers struggle to help young people with interview preparation. Around 40% of Year 11s report they don't feel ready either.

Curriculum meets career conversations

So, how do we build oracy into everyday pedagogical approaches? Careers conversations and applied learning tasks linked to every curriculum subject really present an opportunity to do this. Over the last couple of decades, educators have mainstreamed the concept that literacy is the role of all teachers; students can't access stretching GCSE examinations without subject-specific technical literacy skills – why not apply the same theory to oracy, but link it to "futures," using industry relevant application as an inspirational lever to pathways out of every curriculum subject.

For instance, take a history lesson on industrial change. What if students were asked to role-play a town hall, negotiating factory conditions on behalf of 19th-century workers? Or an English class that ends with a live podcast recording, complete with audience Q&A? When talk is tethered to tangible outcomes, oracy becomes a lived experience, not just a lesson plan. There are lots of examples of where employer-connected activity brings curriculum learning alive and where oracy is a central tenet.

Putting oracy at the heart of education

This isn't about tacking on a "speaking week" or a one-off workshop. Oracy must be woven through every lesson, every project, and every career conversation. It's the bridge between classroom achievement and career readiness. It's both an economic and social imperative for students and employers to thrive.

Because here's the bottom line: in today's world, being able to think on your feet, connect ideas out loud, and inspire an audience isn't a "nice to have"—it's your ticket onto the career ladder.

Nicola Hall, The Careers & Enterprise Company

Amanda Moorghen

Developing oracy for career-readiness

IN **PRACTICE**

At Voice 21, we've been thinking about career-readiness. We know that oracy is important for employers: it's forecast as an "essential employment skill"[1] and over 80% of business leaders support more time being spent on the development of young people's spoken language and listening skills at school[2]. Students also value oracy: communication is identified by young people as the skill "most important for work"[3].

First, we asked — what purposes and contexts for oracy should we be thinking about here? We know that 'oracy' includes everything from high-stakes public speaking, perhaps on a stage in front of a large audience, to low-stakes, non-presentational contexts, perhaps speaking in social contexts with friends and family. In light of this, we first needed to identify which talk contexts, and associated competencies, would help young people prepare for the world of work.

To explore this question, we worked with Royal Holloway University and the Windsor Forest College Group[4] to understand 16-18 year olds' perceptions of their oracy strengths and weaknesses, and work with their tutors to co-construct a series of workshops that would meet their needs. We began with a series of focus groups with the students and their tutors.

> Both staff and students identified small group contexts as a priority.

1. NFER (2023), *The Skills Imperative 2035*.
2. YouGov polling on behalf of the Oracy Education Commission, 2024.
3. Youth Employment UK (2023) *Youth Voice Census 2023*.
4. Funded by an Economic and Social Research Council Impact Accelerator Account to Royal Holloway, University of London

What kinds of talk support career-readiness?

Our focus groups identified two areas of interest:

1. To support students to participate in purposeful exploratory talk in small group contexts, including active listening

Both staff and students identified small group contexts as a priority. This was of immediate importance for students applying for apprenticeships, who are often required to participate in an assessed group task — a context for talk they reported rarely having encountered at school. There is also a wider relevance for all students: discussing issues or solving problems in small groups is a common feature across many workplaces.

Barriers to talk:
When asked to reflect on this context for talk, staff identified a lack of active listening as a barrier. They said that whilst most students listened politely whilst others were speaking, they rarely engaged with what had been said. From their descriptions, it appears that 'cumulative talk' (where students agree uncritically with each other's contributions) is more prevalent than educationally productive 'exploratory talk', where students listen actively and critically, and as a result, advance each other's ideas for a shared purpose[5].

5. Mercer 2008, 'Three Kinds of Talk'.

Students focused on the social context in which they're being asked to learn, and to develop their oracy skills. They noted that in the college environment, learners are in different classes, with different groups of students, from one day to the next. With most students being at college for two years, and working alongside their studies, they do not have the opportunities that they had at school to form close relationships with their peers. As a result, they often felt like they were studying alongside people they hardly knew, and identified this distance as a barrier to talk.

2. To support students to tell stories of self

Both staff and students identified 'interview skills' as a key element of career-readiness. This has two facets. First, the linguistic and cognitive demands of preparing for an interview — knowing how to prepare for likely questions; how to select appropriate examples (e.g. for competency-style questions); how to structure your responses; and how to strike a professional tone. Second, the social-emotional demands — how to approach a talk context where you may feel nervous; and how to relate to your interviewer.

Barriers to talk:
Students reflected on the relative unfamiliarity of this type of talk, and the need for opportunities to practice. Their tutors noted that students have, more widely, been struggling to tell stories of self in their UCAS applications, suggesting that prior to practice, there is a need to teach these linguistic and cognitive aspects of talk, and ensure that students have appropriate opportunities to reflect on their own experiences.

The Oracy for Employability Toolkit

Based on these discussions with students and their tutors, we developed a pilot 'Oracy for Employability Toolkit', which was trialled by tutors in the Windsor Forest College Group in 2025. The toolkit comprised a series of activities, which could be completed during pastoral time, in full or in part, focusing on exploratory talk and stories of self.

Feedback from the trial suggests that we have identified helpful areas of focus, regarding oracy for career-readiness. The toolkit was used flexibly by tutors, as ntended, and students found the materials helpful and engaging.

Interestingly, feedback also reflects that treating a series of oracy activities, for one specific purpose (career-readiness) as isolated from students' wider college experience (as necessitated by our project approach), results in lots of missed opportunities. Most significantly for our work, the tutor team who support students with career-readiness are also responsible for ensuring a successful transition into college. This includes supporting the oracy skills that students will need to thrive. The team identified some strong links between college-readiness and career-readiness. As a result, in the next phase of our project we will connect these contexts for talk. Wider opportunities to make connections with course content and pedagogies are also of course present, but beyond the scope of this project

Following this trial, the project team will continue to develop the Oracy for Employability Toolkit across the following academic year (2025-6), improving its design, adding exemplar materials and exploring other improvements.

Watch out for the Oracy for Employability Toolkit, which will be published in early 2026!

Amanda Moorghen, Voice 21

Neil Mercer & Topsy Page

Ground rules for talk

IN **THEORY**

Oracy is the ability to use the skills of speaking and listening for a wide range of purposes and that includes teaching and learning. School-based research evidence shows that achieving the best learning outcomes for students depends on both teachers and students using their oracy skills to make classroom education productive.

The value of teaching students how to work effectively in groups

Exploratory talk is the kind of discussion which enables people to work together as a group to understand and solve a problem. It requires participants to follow certain kinds of 'ground rules' (or 'discussion guidelines'), so that everybody participates, builds on each other's contributions, and engages in a critical but constructive way to try to reach agreement. But this type of effective, productive group work can't be expected to happen automatically. It has to be explicitly taught and practised.

Mercer, Dawes, Wegerif and Sams[1] investigated whether children in primary schools learned science more effectively when their teachers taught them how to work well in groups. Essentially, the students agreed to follow the ground rules for Exploratory Talk. Comparing 109 children against a similar-sized control group, they found that the programme enabled children to "work together more effectively, improve their language and reasoning skills and reach higher levels of attainment in their study of science." (They also noted "Teachers have reported that participating children find it easier to resolve conflict in situations outside the classroom.")

Howe and Mercer[2] reviewed the research available at the time on how children's collaborative talk contributes to learning and concluded that group work can really help learning and the development of understanding – but that "For collaborative activity to be useful, teachers need to help children develop the necessary communicative skills for engaging intellectually with each other." They also need to be offered suitable activities, with tasks generally designed to encourage cooperation rather than competitiveness. Some children may need more guidance than others on how to engage productively in classroom dialogue, and classroom culture matters. But developing the oracy skills for productive group work benefits all students.

> "There is ... very strong, school-based evidence that (a) students need to be taught how to talk and work well together if group work is to be productive; and (b) if they are, this improves both their oracy skills and their academic attainment.

1. Reasoning as a scientist: ways of helping children to use language to learn science Neil Mercer, Lyn Dawes, Rupert Wegerif and Claire Sams, British Educational Research Journal, Vol. 30, No. 3 June 2004

2. Howe, C. and Mercer, N. (2007) Children's Social Development, Peer Interaction and Classroom Learning (Primary Review Research Survey 2/1b), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education

Howe, Hennessy, Mercer and their colleagues[3], in the Cambridge Classroom Dialogue Project, observed 72 teachers and found that high quality group work (ie more Exploratory Talk) in their classrooms was linked to stronger performance of Year 6 students in Maths and English SATs.

There is therefore very strong, school-based evidence that (a) students need to be taught how to talk and work well together if group work is to be productive; and (b) if they are, this improves both their oracy skills and their academic attainment.

The value of involving students in whole class dialogue

What about whole-class talk?

In the Cambridge Classroom Dialogue project, Howe et al also found that pupils progressed more in Maths and English when teachers:

- achieved high levels of **participation** in whole-class dialogue (numerous children contribute and discuss each other's ideas)
- encouraged children to **elaborate** their ideas (for example, 'Can you explain a bit more what you mean by that?')
- encouraged the **questioning** of ideas by other students ('Do you agree that Tom is right?').

Another large-scale investigation, the Dialogic Teaching Project[4] involved training Year 5 teachers in 78 schools in the techniques of dialogic teaching and comparing the learning outcomes of their students with those of teachers in similar 'control' schools who had not been trained. The result was "consistent, positive effects in English, science and maths for all children in Year 5, equivalent to about 2 months additional progress compared with a similar-sized control group. The intervention was highly regarded by headteachers, mentors, and teachers who thought that the Dialogic Teaching approach had positive effects on pupil confidence and engagement."

Taken together, the findings of these two projects (the only two 'big data' studies of talk and learning carried out in classrooms) strongly support the conclusions that a 'dialogic' approach to teaching achieves the best learning outcomes and levels of student engagement. These are, of course, only studies of talk in primary schools, but smaller-scale research in secondary classrooms supports the same conclusion: that encouraging and enabling students to take an active role, through talk, in their own learning helps them achieve the best academic results.

In conclusion, effective teaching and learning doesn't involve students talking all the time in lessons: but it does require teachers to balance the amount of time they spend instructing and informing students with periods in which students are encouraged to express their thoughts, developing ideas, understandings and misunderstandings – and with organising productive group work. This means students will need encouragement and help to develop their skills in collaborating with other students, explaining ideas, asking questions and – no less important – listening attentively.

Neil Mercer and Topsy Page,
Oracy Cambridge

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

4. The Education Endowment Foundation (2017). educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/promising-programmes/dialogic-teaching (accessed 2.12.24)

Dr Thomas Cousins

Improving engagement in group discussion through playground activities

DOUGLAS BARNES AWARD WINNER

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

Dr Thomas Cousins, a teacher at Pendle, has been exploring oracy in his classroom for several years through practitioner research that highlights the innovative practices developed by schools deeply committed to embedding oracy. His research demonstrates how Pendle has moved beyond a highly scaffolded approach to classroom talk. Students first acquire oracy skills using structured strategies and supports, and then progress to more independent, confident, and meaningful dialogue — applying the skills they have internalised in authentic, purposeful discussions.

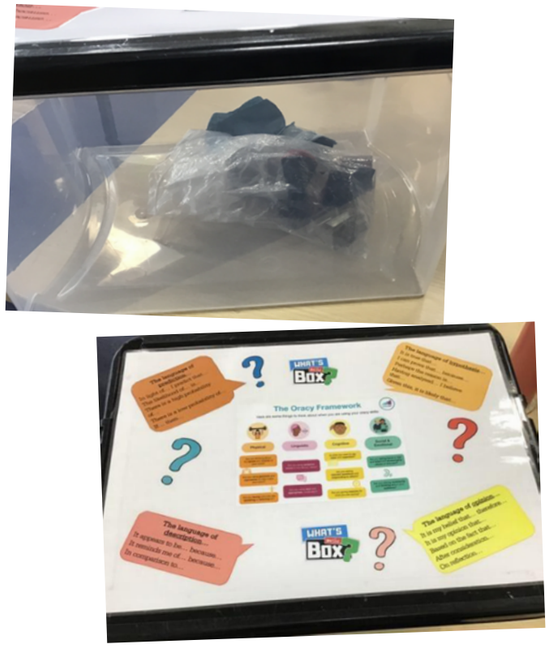
Introduction

At Pendle Primary, oracy is a central part of our school's curriculum; it is woven through every aspect of school life, from classroom practice to the curriculum to the school culture. The focus of this project was to give the students autonomy in an informal environment with the aim of providing them with the tools to engage in exploratory talk outside of the classroom and move beyond the need for scaffolds to support discussion.

Method

As part of the project, students were invited to voluntarily guess the contents of the 'question cube' — a box placed in the middle of the playground containing a mystery object, either unfamiliar or partially hidden. The goal of the question cube was to act as a catalyst for conversation between peer groups.

All 60 pupils in Year 5 were chosen to take part in this project. At the outset, they completed an activity that involved guessing a mystery item. Working in pairs, they recorded an audio commentary in which they discussed and reasoned through their ideas. These recordings were assessed using the school's oracy assessment tool, which rates various aspects of spoken communication on a one- to three-star scale. In the final week of the project, pupils repeated a similar activity and were reassessed using the same criteria, allowing for a clear comparison of progress. To further evaluate the impact of the project, students also completed a questionnaire at both the beginning and end, capturing changes in their self-perception and confidence in speaking.



Question cube, interior object and lid decorated with sentence stems and the Oracy framework to help and guide the pupils.

Oracy assessments before and after question cube intervention

Assessment criteria		Pre-intervention	Post-intervention
A	Construct language effectively for a range of purposes, e.g. to persuade someone.	★★☆	★★☆
	Express my ideas confidently in a range of settings.	★★☆	★★★
	Use the subject specific language of different disciplines, e.g. talking like a scientist, an historian, a mathematician.	★☆☆	★★★
B	Construct language effectively for a range of purposes, e.g. to persuade someone.	★☆☆	★★★
	Express my ideas confidently in a range of settings.	★★☆	★★☆
	Use the subject specific language of different disciplines, e.g. talking like a scientist, an historian, a mathematician.	★☆☆	★★☆
C	Construct language effectively for a range of purposes, e.g. to persuade someone.	★☆☆	★★☆
	Express my ideas confidently in a range of settings.	★☆☆	★☆☆
	Use the subject specific language of different disciplines, e.g. talking like a scientist, an historian, a mathematician.	★☆☆	★☆☆

Findings

The findings from the project provided clear evidence of improvement in students' ability to engage with and discuss unfamiliar content. There was a noticeable increase in purposeful conversation around the question cube, with students actively exchanging ideas about its contents and engaging in respectful debate when encountering differing opinions. Such comments demonstrate that the students engaged with the activity at playtime and also that they thrived in a context for talk where they were given complete autonomy.

The exchange below illustrates a clear and purposeful conversation within a small group:

Child A: 'I think this is a stamp because of the handle sticking out.'

Child B: 'I don't think so, that's not a handle, it's too short.'

Child C: 'I agree with child A, you can see that there is ink on it.'

Child B: 'Is there?' [*looks at box closer*] 'ohh I didn't see that, is it ink though, maybe we should ask Child D.'

What is striking about this conversation is that the students were able to apply the oracy skills that they had learned in the classroom to other contexts, without scaffolding. Such discussions were in stark contrast to the types of discussions and approach that had been seen before the intervention. This suggests that providing students with a clear focus for discussion outside the classroom encourages natural group enquiry and dialogue, demonstrating the lasting impact of years of explicit oracy teaching.

Conclusion

The results of this project indicate that a more open, autonomous and relaxed environment can be helpful to support students to effectively engage in group discussion and debate. This setting helped the students understand the value of oracy beyond the classroom. Following the project, students demonstrated a better understanding of why oracy skills are explicitly taught, practised, and used within school. By stepping back from explicit teaching and scaffolding, students were able to genuinely apply the oracy skills they had learned to engage in meaningful, peer-led discussions.

Dr Thomas Cousins


voice21