Shaping an oracy education that benefits all children and young people

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Good quality oracy education supports students' learning and achievement, but access to these benefits is limited. This brief offers principles for a socially just oracy education that ensures ***all*** children and young people develop as effective communicators, hone their skills in critical thinking, and strengthen their sense of themselves as valued members of schools and society.

The new national oracy framework provides an opportunity to embed this approach and improve outcomes for all.

Spoken language in education – or 'oracy' – has been the focus of recent national initiatives. The Oracy All-Party-Parliamentary Group's *Speak for Change* inquiry advocated for oracy to be 'valued and supported as a golden thread throughout education'[1]. A Commission on the Future of Oracy Education in England argued that oracy 'should be an entitlement in every child's education to prepare them as future citizens'[2].

Building on this, the Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR) gave especial prominence to oracy, drawing on evidence that it 'can support active learning, critical thinking, and enhance students' engagement and understanding'[3].

The CAR underlined barriers to achieving these benefits, most notably that 'guidance for schools on spoken language is limited in its scope and specificity' and 'the current emphasis on spoken language in the curriculum aims is not [...] meeting the needs of all children and young people'[3].

Research supports the point that oracy education is not meeting the needs of all students. Studies have shown that oracy-rich, 'dialogic' approaches to teaching and learning can have significant benefits, especially in schools serving economically disadvantaged students[4], yet these students are often excluded from such opportunities[5].

Government changes to the national curriculum and a new national oracy framework are set to expand provision in England. However, if these reforms are to effect positive change for all young people, the new oracy framework must take a socially just approach, informed by research on spoken language, linguistic diversity and classroom dialogue.

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Three strands of oracy education

This approach brings together three interconnected strands, which the oracy education commission identified as learning *to*, *through* and *about* talk[2].

Learning *to* talk is the explicit teaching of speaking, listening and communication skills to help students develop as creative, flexible and resourceful communicators across a wide range of contexts.

Learning *through* talk is the use of talk-based (or 'dialogic') pedagogies to shape and enhance student thinking and learning. It applies across the curriculum, though there are disciplinary nuances[6]. Teachers pose open questions that elicit a range of student ideas, and they probe student responses, pushing them to extend and clarify their thinking. In turn, students develop, question or challenge others' claims and explain their reasoning[7]. When students participate regularly in dialogic discussion, they internalise these processes of questioning, clarification and justification as habitual ways of thinking. Consequently, they do better on standardized tests than their peers who have not had this experience[4], [8], [9].

Learning *about* talk involves explicit teaching about spoken language and the raising of teachers' and students' critical language awareness. Young people develop an understanding of the different communicative demands that arise in different situations; how language relates to individual and community-based identities, cultures and histories; and how to identify, understand and address language-based inequalities and injustices.

When delivered effectively, all three strands of oracy work together to enhance students' communicative effectiveness, develop their learning across the curriculum, and hone their skills in critical thinking. However, to achieve this, policy makers must navigate two key risks.

RISK 1:

Treating speech as if it should follow the rules of writing

It is regularly taken for granted that there is a ‘standard’ or ‘correct’ way to speak as well as write and that spoken language follows the rules and grammar of writing[10]. However, this is not the case.

An example is the requirement that students ‘speak in full sentences’. The sentence is not a grammatical unit of speech (as it is in writing). Speakers use pitch, stress and tempo to chunk their utterances into meaningful units, and they use ellipsis (leaving out information that is shared by all parties) to deliver their messages efficiently.

Writing can be planned and edited, but unscripted speech is spontaneous, making hesitation, false starts and fillers unavoidable – it is precisely these features that allow us to produce and process speech in real time. Prohibiting such features, requiring ‘full sentences’ or otherwise delimiting the forms of speech students’ use during classroom discussion (e.g. by requiring ‘standard English’ only) will restrict their participation[10].

Students must be allowed to respond, question and elaborate their thinking using the forms of speech in which they are most confident. When teachers create an open and inclusive environment, virtually all pupils participate[4], [11].

It is often assumed that correcting students’ speech will help to improve their writing, but there is no evidence to support this. Research has shown that students’ use of ‘nonstandard’ speech does not have a significant impact on their writing, and that some forms routinely corrected in students’ speech (e.g. ‘ain’t’) do not occur in their writing at all[10], [12].

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RISK 2:

Framing some children's language as deficient

Oracy initiatives have often communicated (at least implicitly) the message that oracy is needed to help students from 'disadvantaged backgrounds', whose language is deficient and unsuited to educational success[13]. This deficit discourse (i.e. language and thinking that focuses on what some young people purportedly lack rather than their strengths) is a barrier to oracy education. It can cause educators to overlook or misunderstand young people's true language capabilities. For example, if educators hear less privileged students' use of 'nonstandard' speech as a sign of linguistic deficiency, they are likely to underestimate these students' linguistic dexterity.

Research has shown that, in practice, young people from all backgrounds make strategic decisions in their language use, selecting forms and meanings that align with their interactional goals, which might be to impress, persuade, build a relationship, or spur someone into action[14]. As they make these choices, they select from their communicative repertoires, which include 'standard English' forms *alongside* 'nonstandard' forms, local dialect vocabulary, terms from popular and youth culture, and other languages.

With spoken language, it is productive to think about language variation in terms of repertoire – the set of communicative resources that a speaker commands and knowledge of how to use those resources – because it captures our ability to create meaning by combining communicative resources in novel ways[14]. Schools should provide students with opportunities to reflect on, share and extend their repertoires, and help them develop confidence and self-esteem by demonstrating that they already have the means and skill to do things with language.

Deficit discourses can also lead to practices that further marginalise less privileged children. This is because educators' views about students' language, identities and abilities inform the decisions they make in the classroom, how they interact with students, and the level of structure and control they apply[15], [16]. Educators may treat some students (unconsciously and inadvertently) in ways that disadvantage them, by assuming that they cannot handle cognitively demanding questions or lack the language resources necessary to participate in academically productive dialogic discussion[5], [16]. This is one reason why students from lower income and racially minoritised backgrounds and those in 'lower set' classrooms (where there is streaming for ability) are least likely to experience dialogic teaching.

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Principles for socially just oracy education

To avoid these risks and ensure all students participate in classroom discussion, oracy policies and practices should incorporate the following principles:

1. Talk is a powerful tool for thinking and learning. Talk for learning does not follow the rules and structure of written language.
1. Student contributions to classroom discussion are taken seriously, regardless of the forms of speech they use.
1. Diverse language resources (including all accents, dialects and home languages) and multimodal forms of communication are legitimate resources for learning.
1. Productive oracy education draws on asset-based approaches to teaching and learning that leverage students' differences and strengths and focus on what they bring to the classroom rather than what they lack.
1. Attitudes and beliefs inform pedagogy and thus educators should reflect regularly on their assumptions about students and how these influence classroom practice.

To support the translation of these principles into practice, a new national oracy framework should extend and amend existing oracy frameworks (such as the Oracy Skills Framework used in Voice 21's teacher development programmes[17]) to incorporate all three strands of oracy (including learning *about* talk) and to centre language diversity and social justice.

An example framework for socially just oracy education can be found here.

Recommendations for the Department for Education

- Consult sociolinguists, educational researchers and practitioners in the design of a national oracy framework for primary and secondary education that incorporates all three strands of oracy and is underpinned by socially just principles.
- Develop assessment criteria for oracy based on the norms of speech (not writing) and in ways that value diverse and authentic language repertoires.
- Avoid deficit discourses about less advantaged students in policy documents and educational resources.
- Promote an asset-based approach to oracy education that leverages students' diverse ways of being, speaking and knowing as strengths.
- Support schools to be flexible in how they enact the national oracy framework, allowing them to develop locally specific oracy policies/strategies that best serve their students.
- Invest in teacher professional development that supports dialogic teaching, explicit teaching about spoken language, and critical reflection on language use and attitudes (capitalising on existing resources e.g., the Language in the National Curriculum project).

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