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Cambridge Papers in English Language Education

The development of oracy skills in school-aged learners



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Introduction

The term 'oracy' was first used by Andrew Wilkinson in the 1960s to emphasise the educational importance of spoken language skills, on a level with reading and writing skills. He defined oracy as 'the ability to use the oral skills of speaking and listening'[1]. The term is now being used more widely, reflecting a growing awareness of the educational and social importance of spoken language skills. Oracy refers to the skills involved in using talk to communicate and collaborate effectively across a range of social contexts. Here, we will use 'oracy education' to mean the direct, explicit teaching of those skills.



1 Wilkinson, 1965, p.13

Part 1: Why is oracy education important?

A focus on oracy education has a significant impact on:

- Children's cognitive development and learning in school.
- Children's social skills as they move through school.
- Children's preparation for participation in the wider world.

As early as the beginning of the 20th century, the Russian psychologist Vygotsky[2] proposed that as children became involved in speaking and listening with others, they experienced ways of talking which provided models for how they could reflect and think themselves. Such cognitive skills in turn influenced their own use of spoken language (see Figure 1). This theory has been confirmed by subsequent research[3].

By being involved in conversations from their earliest years, children learn not only facts and information, they also learn to see a range of points of view. They hear how other people make sense of the world, how language is used to reason about causes and effects, how emotions are expressed, and how to work together to solve problems and get things done. They learn how to use language and how to express their thoughts.

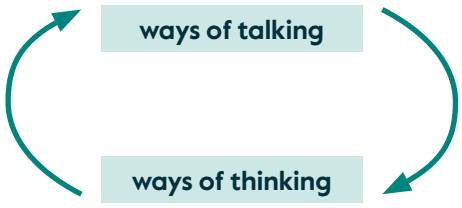


Figure 1. The Vygotskian relationship between language experience and cognitive development

We think in words; language shapes our individual thinking. Spoken language is our prime tool for thinking together or collaborating. Before a child has learnt to read or write, it is a child's only way to communicate using language. Children experience spoken language happening around them, and not just for interaction; we use language to 'interthink'. Interthinking happens when we share thoughts aloud, influencing others. We can convey new ideas and hear a range of points of view. We can change one another's minds by what we say and building upon what is being said. A new, shared understanding can be created.

But although all children have the *capacity* to learn language, they need to learn the specific language skills and vocabulary. They can learn through experience how to use language effectively: but they can also be directly taught language skills and communication, in the same way that they are taught literacy and numeracy skills.

For the child entering school, much depends on what they have already experienced prior to school in the way of spoken language. The more talk young children are actively involved in, the more likely they are to succeed in school.[5 6] Much learning happens through listening in the early years of school, and those who have not learnt to listen, and who have not had the experience to pay attention to or process what they hear, are at a real disadvantage. Similarly those who find it hard to say what they think, ask questions and find the right words in their vocabulary, will need to learn all these things to succeed in learning curriculum subjects.

2 Vygotsky, 1962, 1978
3 Mercer, 2013
4 Littleton & Mercer, 2013
5 Goswani & Bryant, 2007
6 Hart & Risley, 1995

The more talk young children are actively involved in, the more likely they are to succeed in school.

Crucially, schools should offer children every opportunity to develop the spoken language skills which they need in order to make progress in school. Literacy skills (writing and reading) are almost always taught to children; but it is unusual for oracy skills to be taught explicitly. The expectation is that such skills are picked up along the way – which is never expected for mathematical skills. For every child to achieve well and gain the most from their time in school, oracy must be part of the school curriculum:[7]

1. Policy makers and school managers need to understand what oracy skills are and why they are important for the child, the school, and society generally;
2. Time and resources in schools need to be devoted to oracy education;
3. Teachers need training and experience in the teaching, fostering and assessment of spoken language and communication skills;
4. Every child should be taught oracy skills explicitly and helped to become aware of the importance of using talk effectively for learning and getting things done.

Oracy education helps to prepare young people with a set of skills for life.

Employers want well-developed skills in spoken communication from their employees[8]; but they also find that many school leavers lack those skills.[9] Employers need employees who are able to:

- make clear presentations;
- work well in teams;
- listen properly to others;
- solve problems collaboratively.

These are also the skills that equip young people for full participation in democratic processes and life in general.

Oracy skills are important for the future, but it is essential to remember that the child's day to day learning is always affected by their oracy skills. They need to be prepared for their future, but perhaps more pressingly for the child, they need to be given the right tools to do well exactly where they are in space and time – in the classroom, during leisure time, socialising, at home. Children are in the present, and that is where they need the oracy skills that teachers can equip them with.

Oracy skills are important and can be developed in not only in a first-language classroom, but also a second language classroom, as is explained below. Oracy should ideally be embedded across the curriculum. Oracy not only adds value to presentations, discussion and debates but also adds value to collaborative work across the whole curriculum.

7 ESU, 2016

8 CBI, 2016
9 UKCES, 2010, p. 16

Part 2: What are oracy skills?

We can think of oracy skills in four main categories:[10]

1. Physical

A speaker's use of voice, and body language. For example:

- Is the speaker projecting their voice appropriately for the situation?
- Do they speak fluently?
- Do they use their tone of voice appropriately?
- In face-to-face encounters and public presentation, do they use gestures appropriately to communicate their meaning?

2. Linguistic

A speaker's choice of vocabulary, as well as the grammatical quality and structure of their talk. Linguistic skills also include techniques such as use of rhetorical devices, e.g. metaphor or repetition, to enhance or clarify meaning.

3. Cognitive

The content of talk, and how suitable it is for the task. For example:

- Does a speaker consider the level of understanding of a listener?
- Do they use questions well to gain information from others?
- Do they reason clearly?
- In discussions, do they build upon the contributions of others?

4. Social & Emotional

A speaker's use of language as a tool for their social relationships. For example:

- Are they able to use talk to work collaboratively with others to solve problems?
- Do they show a sensitivity to others in the way they ask or respond to questions?
- Do they listen attentively to what others say?

See the Cambridge Oracy Skills Framework, Figure 2.

10 Mercer, Warwick & Ahmed, 2017

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

Figure 2. The Cambridge Oracy Skills Framework[11]

11 See https://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/oracytoolkit/oracyskillsframework/

Cambridge Primary ELT Oracy Framework

	Foundation (CEFR Pre A1)	Apprentice (CERF A2)	Developing (CERF B1)	Confident (CERF B2)
Physical	1. I can speak up so that others can hear me. 2. I can pronounce simple words and phrases clearly. 3. I can stand up straight and remain still when speaking in front of others.	1. I can project my voice so everyone can hear it. 2. I can pronounce my words clearly, and I aim to speak at a speed that my audience can understand. 3. I can stand up straight and remain still when speaking in front of others.	1. I know how to project my voice, adapting it to the situation. 2. I can speak clearly and talk at a speed that my audience can understand. 3. I can use appropriate gestures and body movements when speaking in front of others.	1. I can project my voice confidently and adapt it to the situation. 2. I can speak clearly and confidently and adapt the speed of delivery. 3. I can confidently use appropriate gestures and body movements when making a presentation.
Cognitive	1. I can agree and disagree with others using simple words. 2. I can show / express that I don't understand. 3. I can ask basic questions. 4. I can recognise the beginning, middle, and end of a story or presentation.	1. I can express my own opinion and agree or disagree with different opinions. 2. I can ask questions when things are not clear. 3. I can answer the question "Why?" for straightforward cause-and-effect scenarios. 4. I can use sequencers to mark the beginning, middle, and end.	1. I can express my opinion with supporting reasons and give reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with different opinions. 2. I can ask different types of questions to get further information, clarity, and repetition. 3. I can use evidence to support and argument. 4. I can use sequences and structure my talk into a beginning, middle, and end.	1. I can confidently express my opinions with supporting reasons and give reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with different opinions. 2. I can ask a wide range of questions in different situations, including probing questions. 3. I can confidently use evidence to support an argument. 4. I can organise the content and structure of my talk to conway clear meaning.
Social / Emotional	1. I can speak in front of others. 2. I can take turns and listen to others. 3. I can understand and follow Ground Rules. 4. I can participate actively in pair work and whole-class activities. 5. I can listen patiently to others. 6. I can give and respond to positive feedback.	1. I can speak in front of an audience. 2. I can take turns and listen to others in a discussion. 3. I can suggest basic Ground Rules. 4. I can participate in a discussion. 5. I can listen patiently to others. 6. I can recognise the importance of being positive and can make positive comments on my classmates' ideas.	1. I can speak in front of an audience and interact with the audience. 2. I can recognise and respect the feelings and views of others in a discussion. 3. I can put Ground Rules into use. 4. I can participate in a discussion and elicit contributions from others. 5. I can listen actively and respond when appropriate. 6. I can regularly make positive comments on my classmates' ideas.	1. I can speak confidently and engage my audience in different ways. 2. I can respect and respond appropriately to the feelings and views of others in a discussion. 3. I can explain Ground Rules to others and remind them in necessary. 4. I can participate in a range of discussions and elicit contributions from others. 5. I can listen actively to what others are saying and can respond confidently. 6. I can confidently make positive comments on my classmates' ideas.

Part 3: Teaching oracy skills

We can use the Oracy Skills Framework to plan the systematic teaching of oracy skills. The skills identified or detailed in the Framework can be integrated into teaching and learning by considering them as teaching goals or learning intentions. A good starting point for each category is to identify a specific oracy skill to be developed in a lesson or series of lessons. This might be a skill which particular children seem to need, or might relate well to the curriculum learning goals for the class as a whole.

For example:

- Physical: projecting your voice in a presentation.
- Linguistic: using a three-part list to present an argument.
- Cognitive: using clear reasons to support views, and to evaluate the reasons given by others.
- Social and Emotional: asking students to summarize the views of others, focusing on listening.

In principle, we could construct an oracy curriculum to cover all the specific skills in each category of the Oracy Skills Framework. In practice, we need to be selective, focusing on what students need most.

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The importance of understanding what you are learning

To be successful, oracy education depends on both teachers and students having a clear understanding of which skills are the focus of any activity.

Teachers can introduce and explain a particular skill, demonstrating how to use it by modelling examples. Students can take part in speaking and listening activities, based on their curriculum work, in which they practice the focus skill. A whole class discussion can bring out effective uses of the skill in question.

Evaluations by British school inspectors (OFSTED) of schools which have a high proportion of students who speak English as a second language have suggested that it is particularly valuable if schools emphasise that:

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

There are two aspects to the talk-focused teaching and learning noted in the reports; **collaborative group work** and **presentation**. Both require the key skill of **listening**.

Teaching talk skills for group work and collaborative learning

Collaborative learning has been shown to be very effective for curriculum learning[12], yet, to teachers' frustration, simply putting children together to work in groups is often unproductive.[13] Children can only work well together if they have learned how to do so, and if they have been taught the relevant oracy skills. One of the strongest influences on how children talk during group work is the way their teacher talks with them.[14]

How can teachers develop children's skills in using talk for collaborative learning? There are two crucial steps in this process.

1. Teachers raise students' awareness of the value (for themselves and their classmates) of speaking and listening to others when working in groups.
2. Teachers explain, exemplify and model the kind of reasoned discussion known as Exploratory Talk. This is a way of using language for thinking collectively or interthinking.[15] (In the USA such educationally effective talk is known as Accountable Talk.[16])

This kind of approach has been found to be effective with children as young as six years old.[17]

In Exploratory Talk opinions are justified with reasons, and decisions are made together. Everyone in the group is aware that its purpose is to discuss things. All viewpoints are invited, considered, and heard. The group engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas and are able to both agree and disagree by using language which invites further contributions. They ask for explanation, reasons and elaboration. They listen, summarise, respond, and negotiate; continuing the discussion until their group can agree on a joint decision.

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

1. Teach an explicit awareness of the importance of talk. Teach each of the key skills separately; listening, asking questions, agreeing and disagreeing constructively, explaining, elaborating, negotiating, reporting to the class.
2. Model and teach children's use of language for reasoning using straightforward language; for example teach the use of 'What do you think? Why do you think that?' They should ask children to give reasons to support their views, engage them in extended discussions of topics, and subsequently, encourage them to reflect on what makes discussion productive.
3. Establish a set of 'Ground Rules' for generating effective Exploratory Talk during group work, building on children's own awareness of what makes a good discussion.



Figure 3. Ground Rules for Exploratory Talk[18]

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

18 See thinkingtogether.educ.cam.ac.uk/resources/Ground_rules_for_Exploratory_Talk.pdf

For many children, understanding how to talk with their peers in a discussion, to work on problems together, and to be part of a productive group, is transformative. Learning the relevant oracy skills is an extremely important part of their education. The skills of Exploratory Talk, once taught, stand every child in good stead during their time in classrooms and beyond.

We should note that research shows that simply asking students to work in groups cannot ensure that they work productively. But if students are taught how to use Exploratory Talk, group activity can be a powerful aid to learning.[19] [20] In ELT contexts, use of the students' first language(s) can be beneficial to ensure student comprehension of these ground rules.

Teaching presentational skills

Presentational skills do not usually come naturally to children; they need to be taught. When children learn to use spoken language effectively, they gain social confidence.[21] [22]

> **When children learn to use spoken language effectively, they gain social confidence.**

School 21 in the UK successfully prioritises spoken language learning.[23] In one piece of research, teachers used techniques to develop presentation skills in which students aged 11 years are taught the skills they need to prepare and give a five-minute talk on a topic of their choice. They are supported by a strong positive ethos. They present to a group of peers and listen to the talks their classmates have prepared. Both the teacher and group members then give constructive feedback.

Debate is a useful way to practise oracy skills such as structuring ideas, listening actively and responding to others' arguments. These oracy skills can be explicitly taught and rehearsed so that every student can engage effectively.

Teaching listening skills

Listening, like other oracy skills, can successfully be taught. This is a long-term, cumulative process which begins with the learner's understanding of the importance of listening, and their interest in enhancing their own capacity to listen. The link between listening and thinking is evident. Both depend on spoken language, and are responsible for the child's development of spoken language.[24] Listening lessons can use any curriculum area as context. Learning depends on clear listening objectives and whole-class discussion of how well these were achieved; what were difficulties and how can these be overcome.

Such listening objectives should be determined, but might include;

- to look at the speaker and focus on what they are saying
- to think about what is heard and be able to say what you heard
- to listen to what is said and ask a question
- to listen to what is said and describe what you think about it and so on, depending on context and what it is that the child or children is perceived to require. These objectives can be coupled with curriculum learning objectives.[25] [26]

Asking students to listen to a range of voices, rather than just ones with which they are very familiar, can also help students improve their listening skills. In a second-language context, teachers often listen for accuracy: has the student used the correct grammar and vocabulary? And in turn, students worry about producing language that is inaccurate. But listening in an oracy context is about listening to the meaning of what's being said, not the accuracy of the language. We can emphasise to students that an oracy activity is not about language accuracy, and we should aim to avoid correcting their language where possible.

19 Dawes & Warwick, 2012
20 Dawes & Sams, 2017
21 Mannion & Mercer, 2016
22 Mercer, 2016
23 See http://www.school21.org.uk

24 EEF (2017)
25 Berne, 1998, pp. 169-170
26 Herron & Seay, 1991

An example of teaching oracy skills

Let's take one crucial skill for children aged 9-10 years, which involves both speaking and listening: **'Asking for and giving reasons'**

Beforehand, a teacher needs to have taught children:

- what reasons are
- what reasons are relevant (what are 'good reasons')
- how to ask one another to contribute
- how to include all group members
- how to listen carefully
- how to formulate and share their own reasons
- why all these skills matter, in terms of having learning conversations with classmates.

1. **Find a context for discussion.** Oracy skills are best taught paired with curriculum objectives, so that children develop spoken language competence simultaneously with learning about science, mathematics, or a language. In a '"CLIL" setting, learning objectives for oracy skills can be paired with those for subject teaching, which means that oracy is constantly learned, practiced, reviewed and assessed. For example, there could be two objectives for a secondary science lesson: 'Understanding the phases of the moon' and 'Giving good reasons to support your answer'. A whole-class session can deal with both the science ideas and constructive feedback on how well reasons were asked for and given.

2. **Allow plenty of time**, because talk invariably takes longer than expected when children become involved and interested, and to allow activities such as discussion, presentation, and asking questions to happen in an unhurried fashion.

Examples of topics for oracy activities:

- What makes the moon change shape?
- Why do these six leaves look different when they all do the same job?
- Which is your favourite character in this story?
- On this timetable, how can we travel from York to Leeds in less than an hour?
- Does the picture show that people are well prepared for a flood in this town?
- Which of these five pictures should we put on the classroom wall?

Let us take, for example, the last topic.

Which of these five pictures should we put on the classroom wall?

- Tell students they are going to discuss this question. Show them the five pictures.
- Remind students that they need to give reasons for their opinion.
- Give students Cue Cards (prompts) to provide the language for their task, e.g.
  - *I think... because...*
  - *I like... because...*
  - *I don't like... because....*
- Groups discuss their ideas using Exploratory Talk.
- Hold a whole-class session at the end. Ask for decisions about the pictures, with reasons. Ask groups to say who helped their thinking by asking them to contribute, what they heard that was interesting or made them think twice, and crucially, who asked for and gave reasons that influenced how the group arrived at its ultimate decision. Such immediate examples of oracy achievement reinforce learning.
- Problems with the discussion are openly shared so that the class can amend the 'Ground Rules' for group work (as described earlier) they are using if necessary.
- Give positive feedback and ask children to consider what listening and what spoken language was useful.

Talking Points: a tool for practising Exploratory Talk

Talking Points are a highly effective tool for stimulating and sustaining Exploratory Talk.[27]

- Talking Points are thought-provoking statements which encourage children to talk to one another about a topic, sharing what they know and understand, and what they do not know or are unsure about.
- Talking Points are statements, not questions; research has shown that they generate more imaginative and longer responses from students than questions on the same topic. They help children to focus on a topic and to compare their point of view with that of others. During their group talk, individual children may realise that there is more to think about and learn.

27 Dawes & Warwick, 2012

- They require creative, analytical or evaluative thinking; they require children to provide reasons for what they say.
- Talking Points are assigned in straightforward language with simple vocabulary; they are easy to read so that children can concentrate their thinking on the subject under discussion.
- Talking Points help children in discussion to share their personal experiences and understanding. Children begin to see that some of their ideas can be affected by new evidence or insight. They learn to recognise that classmates are a valuable resource for new thinking.
- Talking Points can be used in a number of different ways. They can be used at the start of a topic to evaluate baseline understanding and then during a topic to share and plan or consider other points of view. At the end of a topic, Talking Points can be used as formative assessment – to establish what has been learnt and to consider next steps.
- In an English language teaching context, use of the students' first language(s) can once again support students to fully understand what has been learnt and next steps.

Some examples of Talking Points

Do you and your group agree or disagree with these ideas, or are you unsure?

1. Magnets

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

2. 'Sunflowers' by Vincent Van Gogh

    - Vincent's name is too big.
    - These flowers need water.
    - Orange and blue do not go well together.
    - This picture makes me feel happy.

The importance of providing prompts

Prompts are useful ways to avoid language itself becoming a barrier to speaking, listening, thinking or learning. Some sorts of structure can enable children to overcome barriers to speaking, and provide groups with ways into thinking aloud.

An example of a prompt is the provision of sentence stems which a child can use to begin a question or an answer. 'My idea is..', 'Can you tell me...', 'The first thing I think is..', 'What would you like to say..', 'Can you explain why..', 'what did you hear...' – such beginnings can be displayed, rehearsed, modelled and used so that they are assimilated into the child's approach to working with others. The sentence stems will depend on what you are talking about with the class, what oracy skill is in focus, your knowledge of the children, their language level, and (for young learners) their stage of cognitive development.

'Less is more' with such prompts. Two to four ideas will enable children to concentrate on the skill being developed - and on what they want to say. Different prompts are useful in different contexts.

Other prompts might be single key words. The child can be expected to use the word and listen for uses by classmates.

Although prompts are needed initially, with practice these should become embedded and automatic.

Language acquired through the use of prompts is cumulative – students become competent in using an expanding range of language. This is particularly important in the ELT context where the prompt language is not necessarily the language they are used to using.

Prompts can include picture clues, use of colour to help with turn taking, use of such things as lolly sticks to draw from a pot and pass around, each child responding to a word prompt.

Prompts can be cards which support Exploratory Talk (What do you think? Why do you think that? I agree because... ; I disagree because...). Once a class has established Ground Rules for Talk, these can be displayed clearly, or feature as a ticker tape on the interactive whiteboard; individuals can be allocated key words to say or hear and report back on.

An oracy lesson plan

Discuss 'Sunflowers' by Vincent Van Gogh

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

Learning Intentions

- To discuss ideas using the Ground Rules for Talk, with a focus on listening and responding to ideas.
- To look at a painting and come to a group agreement about our ideas.

WHOLE CLASS

Introduction

- Explain the task. 'We are going to discuss a Talking Point about a famous painting. We're going to give our opinions. We can agree or disagree with each other.'
- Remind students of the Ground Rules for Talk. Ask 'What are our ground rules about listening? How do we show we are listening?' (We attend, we look at the speaker, we nod.)
- Ask students: 'What language do we need for agreeing and disagreeing?'

Show students Cue Cards:

I agree, because...

I disagree, because...

- Elicit background knowledge by asking 'What do you know about this painting? What do you know about the artist?'
- Ask each group to choose a Talking Point.

GROUP WORK

Ask the groups to look at the painting together and choose one Talking Point to discuss. Remind them that:

- everyone should be invited to speak
- you should give reasons for your opinions
- all ideas will be considered, and may be challenged
- we will talk about it and come to an agreement.

Remind the class to listen and respond to one another.

WHOLE CLASS

Ask the groups to provide a summary of the discussion about their Talking Point.

What did we learn about the painting? Did the discussion help you to see other points of view?

Ask the group to assess their discussion together.

- Did everyone speak?
- Who asked helpful questions?
- Can we suggest who listened actively?
- Did we follow the Ground Rules? What was easy/difficult about it?

Part 4: Oracy and bilingual development

Early reviews of research on bilingualism tended to conclude that growing up bilingually could cause some kind cognitive 'overload'. This sometimes led to parents avoiding teaching their children two languages. However, the general consensus of researchers today is that growing up bilingual has more cognitive advantages than disadvantages.[28] For example, it seems that bilingual children perform better in non-verbal problem-solving tasks which depend on selective attention or inhibitory control; it seems that their abilities to control and select have been enhanced through exercising linguistic choices between different languages.[29] [30] This kind of advantage seems to be sustained throughout a bilingual person's life.

Research on bilingualism also supports the view that some oracy skills are not language-specific. The language level of a speaker will, of course, limit their fluency, and perhaps their intelligibility, in a second or additional language. But oracy skills are not just about linguistic competence. Someone who has learned to consider their listener's knowledge and perspective, or who has learned some strategies for presenting information persuasively to an audience (such as using short lists of important points), should be able to apply that knowledge in more than one language. Likewise, someone who has learned to listen carefully to what others say and has learned the basic social rules for using talk effectively for working in a team, should be able to apply what they know in more than one language setting. Similarly, oracy skills developed in the ELT classroom should easily transfer across the curriculum even though the specific language used will vary.

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

28 Diaz, 1983; Grosjean, 2010
29 Bialystok & Feng, 2010
30 Bialystock et al., 2005

Part 5: Assessing Oracy

Assessment can be for several purposes, for example:

- Teacher-led assessment in order to make decisions about what children need to learn next;
- Teacher-led assessment to report to parents, colleagues or other professionals;
- Self-assessment so that children can identify aspects of their own development and consider their progression.
- Formative, informal peer assessment and group assessment, when classmates comment on positive aspects of one another's oracy skills, perhaps in a whole class session, where the approach is objective, constructive, and positive.

Children's talk during whole-class sessions or during group activities can be used to assess not only their spoken communication skills but also their learning in curriculum subjects. Such everyday assessment can influence planning to meet the needs identified.

Teachers assess children's oracy skills every time they speak or listen to them, this informal assessment providing the basis for planning, grouping or even enlisting the support of other professionals. Formal assessment of oracy can seem difficult because spoken language is hard to capture, and recording discussion may alter its nature. In addition, the context such as topic, grouping or acoustics, radically influences what a child says and hears. But it can be important for both teachers and students that some assessment is made, even if informally, of what progress is being achieved.

When thinking of assessment, it is important to establish:

- The purpose (outcomes and reporting)
- The focus (which oracy skills?)
- The assessor (teacher, peers, child observer)
- What the child will experience during and after assessment.

An overview of a child's capacity to communicate is useful and may be gained by straightforward conversation. Can the child communicate with you and their friends? What difficulties seem apparent? Can they express themselves confidently and clearly? Do they demonstrate active listening?

Even such readily available information can help the teacher to identify those who may need additional support with their oracy skills development.

Summary and conclusions

1. Research in psychology, sociolinguistics and education supports the view that **the development of young people's oracy skills can have a significant impact on their educational achievement, social confidence and future success in their working lives.**

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

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

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

5. Whilst oracy skills deserve to be taught explicitly, research suggests that **the development of talk skills should also be embedded in the teaching and learning of all subjects.** This is particularly relevant when teaching other subjects through the medium of English or in the CLIL context. Pairing oracy and curriculum learning means that oracy can be integrated into everyday teaching and learning. Strategies such as Talking Points can support and sustain learning conversations which involve every child in a class.

6. Although the assessment of oracy needs to be established in the classroom, **it is important for both teachers and students to assess the progress which is being made** in developing skills, even if this is only done informally.

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Neil Mercer is Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Cambridge, where he is also the Director of *Oracy Cambridge: the Hughes Hall Centre for Effective Spoken Communication* and a Life Fellow of the college Hughes Hall. He was previously Professor of Language and Communications at the Open University UK. He is a psychologist with particular interests in the use of talk for thinking collectively, the development of children's spoken language abilities, and the role of teachers in that development. He has worked extensively and internationally with teachers, researchers and educational policy makers. His books include *Words and Minds: how we use language to think together, Exploring Talk in School, Dialogue and the Development of Children's Thinking and Interthinking: putting talk to work*.

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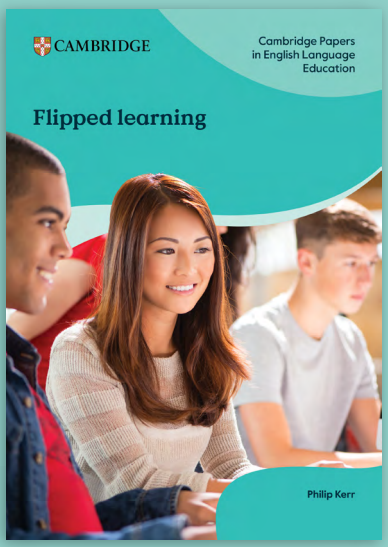


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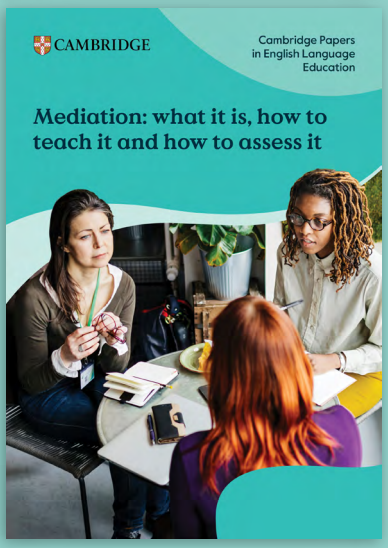
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All details are correct at the time of going to print in July 2026.