

## Written evidence

Members of the Oracy APPG will consider written, verbal and audio-visual evidence and oversee oral evidence sessions. All evidence will inform the final report.

The extended deadline for submitting written evidence is 20th September 2019. We would appreciate if the submissions would follow the following guidelines:

- Be in a Word format
- No longer than 3000 words
- State clearly who the submission is from, and whether it is sent in a personal capacity or on behalf of an organisation
- Begin with a short summary in bullet point form
- Have numbered paragraphs
- Where appropriate, provide references

Please write your evidence below and email the completed form via email to [inquiry@oracyappg.org.uk](mailto:inquiry@oracyappg.org.uk) with the subject line of 'Oracy APPG inquiry'

---

Barbara Bleiman (on behalf of EMC)

Full name:

English and Media Centre (EMC)

School or Organisation:

Education Consultant, Writer

Role:

Written evidence:

## **Submission to Oracy APPG from the English and Media Centre**

The English and Media Centre (EMC) is an award-winning education development centre for English and Media teachers in secondary schools, with a long track record in CPD, publishing, acting as consultants to Awarding Bodies and government agencies on aspects of curriculum and pedagogy. Our work on talk in English classrooms has been a major feature of our approach to teaching and learning in the subject for over 40 years.

### **KEY POINTS**

- It is vital to recognise the difference between 'oracy' and 'talk for learning' in any consideration of talk in schools.
- Talk needs to be a carefully judged part of the assessment framework in order for it to be taken seriously.
- Linguistic knowledge about spoken language and how it works is essential for teachers but should also be a very important part of what students learn, so that performing spoken language goes alongside understanding about it.
- High quality talk is not always highly structured talk. Exploratory talk is as important as rehearsed, performative talk. Talk to 'think aloud' should be part of all learning.
- The language of students' homes, cultures and communities should be valued and celebrated, not ignored or set in opposition to 'school language' or more formal uses of spoken language. Both should form part of a school's oracy policy and curriculum.
- Teacher CPD is essential to ensure that schools' approach to spoken language is informed by sound linguistic knowledge and understanding.

### **VALUE AND IMPACT**

**'Talk is the sea upon which all else floats.'**

**James Britton (1970)**

#### **1. The status of spoken language has been eroded in recent years for a number of reasons:**

- I. the removal of speaking and listening from English GCSE assessment, with a knock-on effect into KS3, where, as a result, it is no longer seen as a high priority. At KS3 this is exacerbated by the limited references to oracy in the current National Curriculum
- II. the removal of the spoken language study from English GCSE, with the loss of opportunities to explore and examine the nature of spoken language, alongside opportunities to develop and extend spoken language in use
- III. the growth of a culture in education that dismisses the value of talk in the learning process, emphasising teacher instruction and 'input' of information at the expense of pupil talk and collaborative learning
- IV. the growth of a culture in schools that sees pupil talk as antithetical to good discipline, with whole school measures that actively discourage or even silence students' voices (e.g. silent corridors, silent classrooms, silent dinner halls)

- V. a view of what 'good' talk is that fails to develop students' confidence as speakers and listeners by drawing on their own cultures, home languages and linguistic repertoires. This includes mistaken notions of correctness in the treatment of Standard English and dialects and fundamental misunderstandings about how talk works as compared with writing (e.g. requiring students to talk in 'full sentences' when this is not only unnatural but also inappropriate)
- VI. an underlying (but not insurmountable) difficulty in assessing students' use of spoken language, which makes the education system uneasy about it. In the current culture, the perceived unreliability of assessing speaking and listening is often quoted as a reason for not doing it. Reliability is an issue for any form of assessment – written as well as spoken – and should not be the excuse for neglecting the teaching of a fundamental set of skills.

## **2. The value and impact of oracy and how it can deliver the wider curriculum**

There are two aspects to talk in schools which are often unhelpfully conflated. Both are vitally important and there are certainly overlaps between them but it seems to us to be essential to understand the distinction if we are to move forward with proper understanding and valuing of talk in schools.

- I. **Oracy is the teaching of speaking and listening in its own right.** Oracy is 'performative' and in terms of education, the teaching can focus on ways of 'performing' speech better. This includes the full spectrum of ways in which people speak – speeches, debates, performances, group discussion and decision-making, interviews and so on. Teachers might spend time reflecting with students on how to talk more effectively, use an appropriate tone and register, make eye contact, take turns in discussion, be respectful, speak loudly and clearly, listen well and so on.
- II. **Talk for learning, though connected, is distinct from this.** The focus of attention pedagogically is not so much on how well you can talk but rather on how talk can assist the learning of a subject. As reported by the 2011 National Curriculum review panel: 'There is a compelling body of evidence that highlights a connection between oral development, cognitive development and educational attainment.' So, here talk (in whole class discussion, group work or pair talk) will be used to think about ideas, develop understanding, tease out complexities, consolidate knowledge, encourage questioning and the sharing of uncertainties, uncover misunderstandings and so on. There is much research on the importance of this, for instance Debra Myhill's work on talk for writing and the role of talk in the teaching of grammar, Nystrand et al on dialogic classrooms and the benefits of talk in English lessons, Robin Alexander's work on dialogic talk in primary classrooms, recent research on the importance of talk in developing vocabulary and reading comprehension and so on. The work of the past, such as that of James Britton, Douglas Barnes, Harold Rosen and others on language across the curriculum, *A Language for Life* (the Bullock Report, 1975) and the LINC project (1989-1992), all demonstrate this in action, with their inclusion in some cases of extended transcripts from across the curriculum. The 'Let's Think' project, based at Kings College, London, has done excellent work showing how work on texts in

English benefits from group talk. EMC's own self-funded group work project set up in 2015, 'It's Good to Talk', also demonstrates this clearly with video exemplification which we hope to submit as evidence by the January deadline.

Both of these approaches to speaking and listening need to be developed. The former is essential to the development of skills, aptitudes and the confidence of students as they develop to become fully engaged citizens and young adults, in their working and personal lives. The latter is essential for students to learn their subjects, grapple with ideas and grow in their understanding but will be equally important in their future adult lives, in helping them to collaborate with others, at work or leisure. Developing knowledge in subjects, whether Humanities, Sciences, languages or the creative arts, is dependent on the quality of classroom talk about the subject. Interestingly, we believe that increasingly there is a divide developing, where independent schools and grammar schools where students are given more of these opportunities to enrich their subject knowledge through talk, while schools in more challenging circumstances are eschewing this. This is something that an oracy initiative should investigate further, given that too much focus on 'oracy' at the expense of 'talk for learning' risks widening rather than decreasing the gaps in educational opportunity. (See Nystrand et al for research on the ways in which dialogic classrooms benefit disadvantaged students even more than others.)

- III. There needs to be a recognition that students have an entitlement to have their voices heard, both in writing *and* in speech. This is a basic children's right, as outlined under UNCRC:

**Article 13**

The child shall have the right to **freedom of expression**; this right shall include **freedom** to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

In some schools, it seems to us, this fundamental right is being significantly curtailed, if not wholly denied. The negative impact on students' confidence, sense of identity and self-worth, their agency and active involvement in their own learning seems to us to be significant. It denies them opportunities which will benefit them in their future lives as citizens and employees, as well as constraining them in the here and now of their education.

**PROVISION AND ACCESS**

1. What should high quality oracy education look like?

- I. It should include a focus on both oracy and talk for learning
- II. It should value the language that students bring to the table, as well as extending their talk repertoires
- III. It should marry up *doing* talk with *learning about* talk, as part of developing students' understanding and knowledge about language. Equally, teachers across the curriculum would themselves benefit from some CPD in linguistics, to explore the differences between talk and writing and prescriptive and descriptive notions of correctness in relation to standard English and varieties of spoken English.
- IV. It should recognise the importance of exploratory talk and loosely structured talk, as well as structured talk. Some recent discussions of successful talk, such as EEF

Literacy Guidance for KS3, (2019) suggest that successful talk has to be heavily structured, with roles, talk protocols and so on. In fact, though these can be helpful in the early stages in teaching aspects of oracy, they can become barriers to good, exploratory talk in subject areas if they are applied routinely. This has strong parallels with the heavy scaffolding of writing, where the structures, forms and formulae come to inhibit the free flow of thinking and students' own ability to shape and develop sustained lines of thought, pursue arguments and ideas and find out more in ways that are not always simple, linear and neatly organised. This extract from *A Language for Life* (1975) remains as pertinent as ever:

*When children bring language to bear on a problem within a small group their talk is often tentative, discursive, inexplicit, and uncertain of direction; the natural outcome of an encounter with unfamiliar ideas and material. The intimacy of the context allows all this to happen without any sense of strain. In an atmosphere of tolerance, of hesitant formulation and of co-operative effort the children can 'stretch' their language to accommodate their own second thoughts and the opinions of others. They can 'float' their notions without fear of having them dismissed. Larger and more formal contexts make different demands, and the child should learn to be able to cope with these. The exploratory dialogue of the small group will obviously not serve when the pupil is presenting ideas to the whole class. (10.12)*

Even with performative talk (speeches, interviews and so on), an over-emphasis on form, preparation, learning off-by-heart, perfection and so on can be counterproductive. Good speech has an improvisatory quality that should not be lost in the teaching of it.

- V. We should not over-emphasise the difficulties of developing talk in classrooms by suggesting to teachers that it only works well in very limited circumstances, or that talk is only of an 'all-singing, all-dancing' variety. Often small opportunities, woven into other kinds of classroom work, are just as effective as big talk 'events'. As with all kinds of learning, multiple ways can work, using many different approaches. Teachers need support in selecting from a wide repertoire and making sensitive judgements about how much or how little, how long or short a talk activity should be to maximise learning.
- VI. We should not allow talk to be passed over because students (and teachers) find it difficult. In no other essential element of teaching (reading and writing, mathematics, science) do we say that we won't do something with students because they find it hard. There is a wealth of research connecting high quality talk and high quality learning.
- VII. Despite all the difficulties, talk should be assessed, in order to give it value both for teachers and students. Many other jurisdictions have long histories of oral assessment, through vivas and other forms of spoken presentation, where students are assessed not on oracy for its own sake but on their knowledge of the subject itself. We would argue that this kind of assessment *through* talk, rather than assessment *of* talk would be a hugely significant way of encouraging the development of oracy in schools. Alternatively, or additionally, it should be

possible for students to accumulate a 'portfolio' of examples of talk, drawn from their experiences across the school, to assess for speaking and listening itself. This would be one way of ensuring reliability and validity.

- VIII. It should draw on the rich traditions of work on oracy, rather than ignoring these and starting from scratch. The National Oracy Project (1987-1993) is an excellent repository of thinking and practical pedagogy that is barely mentioned these days, even by those working on oracy. The work of Douglas Barnes and others on talk across the curriculum, the LINC project, the work of Professor Neil Mercer and Lynne Dawes all offer excellent models both of work on oracy and talk across the curriculum. EMC's own publications and resources and CPD over 40 years or more, exemplify ways of successfully shaping and supporting exploratory talk, as well as oracy. Our current work on 'It's Good to Talk' offers evidence, practical pedagogy, teacher experiences, all of which could contribute to effective, high quality provision and training for teachers. In terms of assessment, the APP assessment guidelines for speaking and listening at KS3 (2010) offer a good starting-point for the kind of approach teachers might take, and did take, prior to the removal of speaking and listening from formal assessment within English.

### **BARRIERS**

Many of the barriers to developing oracy/talk for learning in schools, and ways of overcoming them, have already been discussed under other headings. However, a few more remain worthy of comment:

- I. The need for support for teachers via high quality CPD. In our view this should include not only support with pedagogy but also an element of linguistic knowledge, to help teachers understand the nature of spoken language and the arguments around it. All teachers, across the curriculum, should have some opportunities to look at the debates and encounter the thinking of linguists such as Professor Ron Carter, Rob Drummond, Debra Myhill and others whose work in this field can help distinguish between informed understandings and popular misconceptions.
- II. The need for a balance between requiring oracy and promoting it. This balance, in our view, can only be achieved with an element of assessment but it should avoid becoming a rigid, constraining structure. Rather, it should be a light-touch, sensitive tool that enables good oracy teaching.
- III. For an example of good educational pedagogies where provision has improved, one might look to the closely connected innovation of the introduction of a spoken language investigation in the previous iteration of GCSE English. Though it involved teachers in learning new knowledge it proved highly successful in encouraging understanding of spoken language (both for teachers and students). The reinstatement of something along these lines could be an important step and make a strong contribution to better teaching and understanding of oracy.

### **USEFUL REFERENCES TO KEY DOCUMENTS AND RESEARCH**

*A Language for Life* (the Bullock Report, HMSO, 1975)

Dorothea Anagnostopolous, Emily R. Smith, Martin Nystrand: 'Creating Dialogic Spaces to Support Teachers' Discussion Practices: An Introduction' (*English Education*, Vol 41, No 1 (Oct 2008))

Arthur N. Applebee, Judith A. Langer, Martin Nystrand and Adam Gamoran: 'Discussion-Based Approaches to Developing Understanding: Classroom Instruction and Student Performance in Middle and High School English' (*American Educational Research Journal*, Vol 40, No 3 (Autumn, 2003))

Douglas Barnes: *From Communication to Curriculum* (1976)

Douglas Barnes: 'Why talk is Important' (*English Teaching: Practice and Critique* Sept 2010 Vol 9, No 2)

Douglas Barnes, James Britton Harold Rosen: *Language, the Learner and the School* (Penguin 1969)

Valerie Coultas: *Constructive Talk in Challenging Classrooms* (Routledge, 2007)

EMC *It's Good to Talk: Developing Group Work in English*: blogs, reports, videos  
<https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/cpd-and-consultancy/our-projects/its-good-to-talk-developing-group-work-in-english>

Ros Fisher, Susan Jones, Shirley Larkin & Debra Myhill: *Using Talk to Support Writing* Sage Publications, (April 2010)

Adam Lefstein and Julia Snell: *Better than Best Practice: Developing Teaching and Learning Through Dialogue* (Routledge, 31<sup>st</sup> Oct 2013)

Let's Think in English: <https://www.letsthinkinenglish.org/>

Karen Littleton and Neil Mercer: *Interthinking: Putting Talk to Work* (Routledge, 2013)

LINC (Language in the National Curriculum) Resources (1989, available from University of Nottingham)

Neil Mercer and Steve Hodgkinson: *Exploring Talk in School* (Sage publications, 23 Sept 2008)

Debra Myhill, Susan Jones and Anthony Wilson: 'Writing conversations: Fostering Metalinguistic Discussion about Writing' (*Research Papers in Education*, Vol 31 8 Jan 2016)

National Oracy Project (1987 – 1983) Unavailable, except in libraries.

## Additional guidance:

### Value and impact

1. Given many teachers recognise the importance of oracy, why does spoken language not have the same status as reading and writing in our education system? Should it have the same status, and if so why?
2. What are the consequences if children and young people do not receive oracy education?
3. What is the value and impact of quality oracy education at i) different life stages, ii) in different settings, and iii) on different types of pupils (for instance pupils from varied socioeconomic backgrounds or with special educational needs)?
4. How can it help deliver the wider curriculum at school?
5. What is the impact of quality oracy education on future life chances? Specifically, how does it affect employment and what value do businesses give oracy?
6. What do children and young people at school and entering employment want to be able to access, what skills to they want to leave school with?
7. What is the value and impact of oracy education in relation to other key agendas such as social mobility and wellbeing/ mental health?

8. How can the ability to communicate effectively contribute to engaging more young people from all backgrounds to become active citizens, participating fully in social action and public life as adults

## Provision and access

1. What should high quality oracy education look like?
2. Can you provide evidence of how oracy education is being provided in different areas/education settings/extra-curricular provision, by teachers but also other practitioners that work with children?
3. What are the views of teachers, school leaders and educational bodies regarding the current provision of oracy education?
4. Where can we identify good practice and can you give examples?
5. What factors create unequal access to oracy education (i.e. socio-economic, region, type of school, special needs)? How can these factors be overcome?
6. Relating to region more specifically, how should an oracy-focused approach be altered depending on the context?

## Barriers

1. What are the barriers that teachers face in providing quality oracy education, within the education system and beyond?
2. What support do teachers need to improve the delivery of oracy education?
3. What accountability is currently present in the system? How can we further incentivise teachers to deliver more oracy education to children and young people?
4. What is the role of government and other bodies in creating greater incentives and how can this be realised?
5. What is the role of assessment in increasing provision of oracy education? What is the most appropriate form of assessment of oracy skills?
6. Are the speaking and listening elements of the current curriculum sufficient in order to deliver high quality oracy education?
7. What is the best approach – more accountability within the system or a less prescriptive approach?
8. Are there examples of other educational pedagogies where provision has improved and we can draw parallels and learn lessons?