

1. Summary:

- The Access Team at Trinity College, Oxford believes that oracy teaching can improve attainment, alongside equipping students with the thinking and interview skills necessary to access top universities like Oxford, and benefit fully from their courses.
- We show, as university outreach practitioners, that sharing funding, resources and knowledge with teachers to improve oracy teaching benefits all types of students, but particularly those who are disadvantaged.
- We believe that raising the status of oracy in the school syllabus would enhance our localised projects to improve attainment and university access.

2. Introduction:

This report was collated by Trinity College's Access Team and outlines the rationale, delivery and evaluation of the first year of our Oracy Outreach Project with the aim of answering some of this Inquiry's questions.

3. Why do we care about oracy development in schools?

One consequence of students lacking oracy skill is that they are less able to access top universities like Oxford, reducing potential for social mobility and limiting future life chances. Strong oracy skills are essential to succeeding in the Oxford admissions process and on-course as they contribute to attainment, strong interviewing skills and the ability to engage in tutorial teaching. Tutorials are the primary teaching format at Oxbridge and involve tutors running small group sessions in which every student is expected to verbalise and defend their ideas frequently.

Oxford's 2020 Annual Admissions Statistical Report shows that significant progress has been made to diversify the student body but state school students are still under-represented, making up 62.3% of Oxford's 2019 UK intake but making up 74.7% of UK students who achieve AAA or better at A-level.¹ We suggest that better oracy provision in state schools may help to reduce this gap. Oxford's Access and Participation Plan 2020-25 outlines the University's aims for increasing access. The first is 'to reduce the gap in participation rates for disadvantaged students', the second is 'to reduce the gap... for under-represented students', and the sixth is to work with teachers 'to help raise attainment.'² At Trinity, this has translated broadly into prioritising students in state school settings, particularly schools with high numbers of disadvantaged students, for outreach and skill-building activities.

A survey of 900 UK teachers found that, compared to those at independent schools, state school teachers are less likely to feel that it is 'very important' to develop oracy skills, less likely to report that their school has debating clubs, and more likely to report major barriers to oracy teaching.³ State school students tend to have fewer opportunities to learn to and through 'talk'. This is especially apparent in deprived students. By age five, 75% of these children are below average in language development and poorer children are less likely to catch up once at school.⁴ This research demonstrates that our highest priority students are more likely to miss out on oracy education. This is problematic because we know that oracy development correlates with

¹ *Annual Admissions Statistical Report* (2020)

<https://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/Annual%20Admissions%20Statistical%20Report%202020.pdf>, p. 16.

² *University of Oxford Access and Participation Plan 2020-21 to 2024-25* (2020)

https://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/UniversityOfOxford_APP_2020-21.pdf, p. 11

³ W. Millard and L. Menzies, *The State of Speaking in Our Schools* (2016)

<https://cfey.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Oracy-Report-Final.pdf>

⁴ The Communication Trust, *Talking about a Generation* (2017)

https://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/media/540327/tct_talkingaboutageneration_report_online.pdf, pp. 23 and 27.

academic achievement.⁵ Dialogic teaching improves the development of conceptual understanding, reasoning and open-mindedness.⁶ Not only do these thinking skills improve attainment, they align closely with top university admissions requirements and compliment university teaching, particularly Oxford's tutorial system.

Flexible thinking skills are essential to every aspect of Oxbridge's holistic admissions process. Students must demonstrate these in both written form (e.g. tests and personal statements) and verbally (at interview). State school students who achieve the correct grades to apply, are less likely to have the oracy skills necessary to shine, perhaps most obviously in interviews. Interviews are like mini-tutorials, they test students' thinking skills by asking challenging questions and encouraging students to enter discussion and vocalise ideas. Oxbridge admissions are extensively contextualised but raising the status of oracy skills at school could, in the long term, contribute to improved access rates for state school students. Additionally, students who start with weaker oracy skills are more likely to struggle on-course where these skills are tested and pushed, further exasperating attainment and progression gaps for disadvantaged students beyond graduation.

A Trinity Lecturer, who conducts interviews and tutorials in History and Classics, has outlined powerful anecdotal evidence that supports these ideas:

'I am a tutor with twenty years of experience in teaching and assessing candidates for admission to courses in Humanities subjects. Oracy skills are fundamental to engagement with these courses at all stages... At Admissions, the ability to present ideas or arguments coherently in oral discussion is fundamental to selection because this skill underpins success in... the tutorial system. It follows that candidates are at a substantial disadvantage if they are not used to articulating their own responses to questions or to material presented at sight... in fact an Oxford interview may be their first experience of this. Candidates in this group frequently fall silent, failing to produce evidence by which their suitability according to the selection criteria at interview may be assessed. Once on-course, students who start with weak oracy skills are at an immediate disadvantage because in tutorial discussion the student will have a much less developed capacity for participation. This weakness is likely to become exposed in front of peers and tutors, potentially leaving the student feeling inadequate and therefore even more likely to stay silent. Lack of development in this area is thereby perpetuated and the student may never catch up...'

Flora is a second-year History and Politics student at Trinity who attended Wheatley Park School and Cherwell College, both Oxfordshire state schools. She identifies strongly with this issue and provides a useful personal perspective.

'A productive tutorial depends... on the student... being able to articulate their understanding of the topic in a clear and confident way... In my first year, I was struck by the confidence of students who were able to ad-lib in academic discussions with conviction. I had trouble with presenting and responding on the spot, and spent a lot of time worrying not about writing the essays, but discussing them. When it came to my first-year seminars, half a term had gone by before I felt comfortable enough to articulate my thoughts to an audience. I think this experience reflects a wider access issue that endures well beyond the admissions process: many people, when arriving at university, have years of experience in discussion, debate, and articulating their opinions, and others have none... After two years of tutorials and public-speaking

⁵ Some examples include B. Hart and T. R. Risley, *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children* (Brookes, 1995); *Speaking Frankly: The case for oracy in the curriculum* (The ESU and Voice 21, 2019).

⁶ N. Phillipson, *Why does Dialogic Teaching work?* (2017) <http://21stcenturylearners.org.uk/?p=1054>; N. Mercer, *Why teach oracy?* (2014) <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/discussion/why-teach-oracy>

scenarios at university, I have developed confidence in my speaking skills through practise. I wonder whether my initial trouble with oracy could have been alleviated if this skill had been a greater part of my education long before jumping in at the deep end at university... Though I realise that facilitating debate and discussion in school settings - especially with big class sizes - is not always easy, these are skills that could go a long way in making the playing field at university feel more level.'

4. Trinity College Exploratory Oracy Project 2019-20:

Trinity's Access Team are responsible for working towards the University's Access and Participation aims primarily in Oxfordshire and the Northeast. There has been increasing awareness at the University generally that oracy skill development can support our aims. Oxford's Undergraduate Admissions and Outreach team, for example, have collaborated with The Challenge Academy Trust in Warrington this year to deliver a project aimed at developing skills, including oracy, that raise school attainment.

While exploring ways to support oracy development, we discovered Voice21 and designed a two-part oracy project;

- 1) Teacher pioneers: We funded five Oxfordshire teachers from three secondary and two primary schools to complete Voice21 Oracy Pioneer training with the aim that they would take this learning into their classroom and embed it into their school's teaching culture.
- 2) Outreach practitioner pioneers: We trained as Voice21 Oracy pioneers ourselves so that we could a) build implicit oracy skill development into all types of outreach sessions and b) use this learning to generate programmes and resources to benefit students and teachers in Oxfordshire and the Northeast. The latter involves designing a sustainable oracy programme which can be delivered by us to each year group alongside training teachers to use these resources and to adopt the techniques in them into their own teaching.

Both parts work towards building a professional oracy teaching network made up of teachers and Trinity access staff who can support each other to deliver high quality and sustainable oracy teaching.

5. Evaluation of Trinity's Oracy Project Part 1:

We have worked closely with our Oxfordshire oracy pioneer teachers, sharing best practise, issues and results throughout. The following two contributions can help to inform questions about the value of oracy teaching alongside highlighting some barriers and some good practise examples.

Leanne Jones is an Assistant School Leader and Key Stage One teacher at Queen Emma's Primary School in Oxfordshire:

'I have personally enjoyed attending the Oracy Pioneer Programme and professionally have recognised the importance of explicit oracy teaching... I have... trialled the oracy framework over the last 2 years. In September 2018, the techniques were initially implemented within a mixed year 3 and year 4 class. My small scale project intended to measure the impact of oracy on my EAL pupils. However, embedding oracy into just one class was incredibly difficult. On reflection, I understood that oracy needed to be taught throughout the whole school and embedded into daily classroom practice to enable impact on speaking and listening skills... We were able to implement rules for discussion that were linked to our school rules. The children began to explore roles for discussion and how to challenge each other respectfully. In regards to my EAL pupils, I was able to see progress and improvements in their dialogue and confidence. The biggest impact was social and emotional. They were able to communicate more effectively with others and have confidence that they were going to be understood and therefore have meaningful discussions. It also helped

these children build relationships. In September 2019, I moved into teaching year 1 and 2. I wanted oracy to have a greater impact and know it works best when introduced early in a child's education. I have found that, since September, the children's oracy skills have developed greatly. One key success we have had is the way the children build on or challenge each other in discussions. They are able to respectively deepen a topic of conversation and explore different points of view. Early on in the academic year, I delivered whole school CPD to our staff. As a result, oracy is beginning to be embedded across all year groups and though-out different areas of the curriculum. We have started to see an impact in all year groups... We recognise that greatest impact has been where oracy has become part of everyday teaching practice. Our school is committed to the teaching of the oracy framework and appreciate the impact it can have on speaking and listening skills when delivered as a whole school approach and starting from their first year in education.'

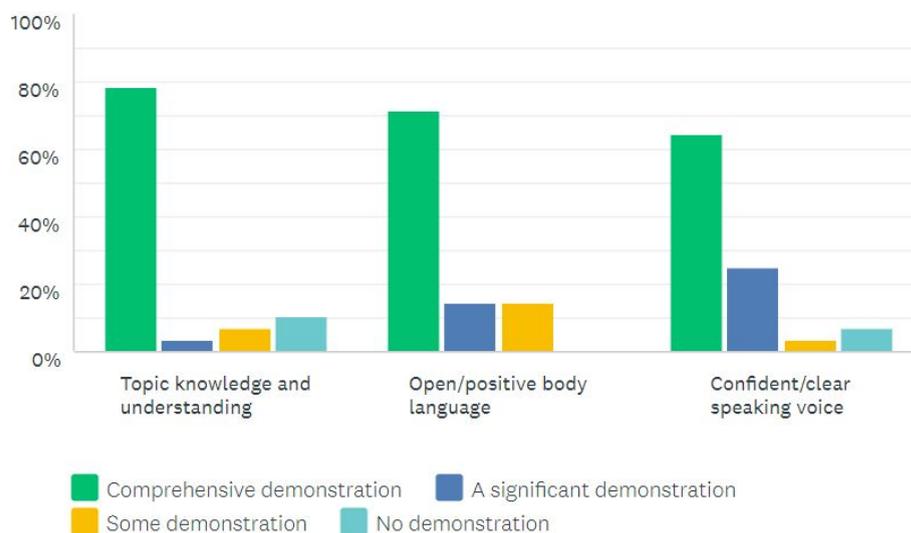
Samantha Roberts is an English Teacher at The Henry Box School in Oxfordshire:

'I was really grateful to take part in Trinity College's Oracy Project and to attend the Voice 21 workshops with the rest of the team... I had repeatedly seen the benefits of using Philosophy for Children in the classroom... but really wanted to diversify my oracy teaching so that I could share these skills with my department and embed them into new Key Stage 3 and 5 schemes of work. The more oracy strategies I trialled and included in my lessons, the more confident my students became in articulating their response to a question or given view. I saw the most progress with my Year 12 English Literature class. Previously, whole class discussions had solely relied upon using 'hands up' and expecting/hoping that the same students would share their ideas. This meant that students' practice exam responses became heavily structured and largely the same because they were relying on me to 'spoon-feed' them their plan or didn't feel confident to explore their own opinions. Gradually, I moved away from a traditional format, and started to experiment with more oracy strategies for improving exploratory talk... I started small – using sentence starters to scaffold discussions in pairs, or arranging the chairs into a fishbowl shape – and then gradually increased the size of the groups and removed the scaffolding until the whole class were... asked to discuss their ideas for 10 minutes or more! The students' new-found confidence in holding and maintaining their own discussions without the involvement of a teacher has been invaluable in not only improving their writing skills within an exam context but also in helping to prepare them for the seminar-style environment of Higher Education.'

6. Evaluation of Trinity's Oracy Project Part 2:

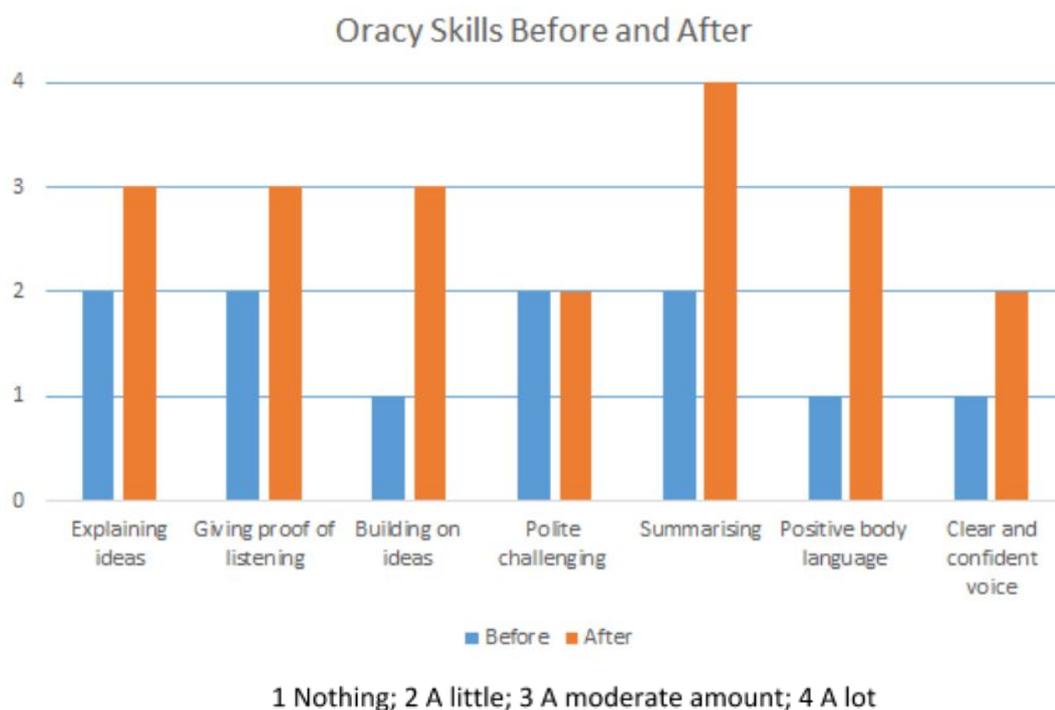
This year, we have developed a sustained oracy programme for Year 6 and Year 10. We ran a pilot programme to test our resources with thirty Year 6 students at St Francis Primary School in Oxfordshire. This consisted of five sessions over the course of four months in which we explored the topic of 'university' using Voice21's oracy techniques. The first session took place at Trinity College and was followed by four 50-minute sessions in school. Our aim was to increase the students' knowledge of university while developing their confidence and competence in oracy. Activities included storyboards, fed-in pictures and listening games and were designed to enable the students to produce a small-group presentation in their final session. Figure 1 shows our assessment of these presentations, which took a variety of creative forms including posters, raps and videos. It demonstrates that sustained sessions, even during a short intervention, can improve oracy skills which, in turn, support the acquisition of knowledge. The vast majority of the class displayed these improvements.

Figure 1:



Unlike our teacher pioneers, and the teachers we support, who can embed oracy teaching consistently across their classes and their school, our outreach sessions tend to reach many students for stand alone activities over a limited timeframe. From 2018-19, for example, we delivered or supported almost 200 outreach activities and engaged with around 5,000 pupils in one off events. Equally, our teacher support is restricted to those who engage with it. Despite these limitations, our small, local and personalised projects have notably positive impacts suggesting that introducing sustained oracy provision in whole schools would reap even larger rewards. Figure 2 shows the Year 6 teacher’s evaluation; Simon saw improvements in all but one area of oracy development in his students following our sessions showing lasting impact.

Figure 2:



Simon's qualitative feedback further reinforces our conclusion that delivering sustained sessions has the greatest impact:

'The children of St Francis CofE Primary School benefited immensely from the Trinity College Oracy Project... The catchment of St Francis is a deprived one, with 32% of pupils eligible for free school meals and an additionally large percentage of working poor. The children have a dearth of opportunity despite living just miles from internationally acclaimed seats of learning. They lack confidence in themselves and all too often lack a voice. Before taking up the offer to join Trinity's scheme, I had already identified the children's lack of oracy skills. Even those children who had a solid knowledge base were reluctant to share. Simple "show and tell" activities would often be painfully slow and would require much more scaffolding that I would expect for year 6 children. After our initial visit, Trinity College representatives came to visit our school on four separate occasions... This allowed the children to deepen their understanding of the subject and to grow in confidence with sharing their understanding. A small percentage of the children would confidently talk about any subject with little or no subject knowledge prior to the project. They learnt that having a firm grasp of the subject matter enhances the performance. The larger (less confident) part of the cohort began to open up and engage in the task much more readily. They produced presentations and... were able to talk (or rap) confidently about subjects that previously they knew nothing about. The contrast between where the children were before and after the project is perhaps more marked in their listening ability however. They came to realise that as their own oracy developed, other's had things to say that were worth listening to.'

Following the early success of this pilot, we developed a Year 10 programme consisting of just two oracy sessions to account for the more limited time available in Year 10 timetables. Session 1 involves oracy scaffolding activities that support students to share ideas and think critically about a debate question from Oxford's online outreach platform, 'Oxpire'.⁷ Session 2 requires each student to present a structured argument in a group either for or against this question that they have prepared together between the sessions.

While COVID-19 has prevented us from piloting this programme with students, we have been able to use it to share good practise with Oxford PGCE teachers. All nine of the teachers involved in the remote training found it 'useful' or 'extremely useful' and all said they would use the oracy techniques presented. Following this, we will run remote training with our Oxfordshire and Northeast teachers as well as training the next cohort of PGCE teachers, continuously growing our professional oracy network.

Conclusion:

Following the qualitative feedback from these projects and anecdotal feedback from our tutors and students, it's possible to argue that unequal access to oracy education is one significant factor negatively impacting state school students' chances of accessing top universities, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Though we need to carry out longitudinal research, looking at the resulting admissions data, these short-term and small-scale interventions, somewhat interrupted by COVID-19, have shown strong evidence of potential to combat oracy inequality. Arguably, our most effective work remains in supporting our teachers to make connections between oracy teaching, raising attainment and increasing access to selective universities. Increasing the status of and time for oracy within the syllabus would incentivise more teachers, potentially broadening life choices and increasing access to top universities for many students.

⁷ University of Oxford, *Oxpire: The Home of Big Questions* <https://oxpire.org/>

