

Yvonne Williams
Head of English and Drama Portsmouth High School

Please see below:

Speaking and Listening in examinations

At present lip service is paid to Oracy in the national qualifications. In the past it could constitute 20% of the final grade for GCSE English Language. At one stage it was doubly useful: it formed 20% of the final English Language grade and was also separately certificated.

The reasons for the change to today's arrangements lie in the grade creep when it was felt that schools were supplying inflated grades. My son took his GCSE in the year that the speaking and listening grade was suddenly cut out of the qualification and given a separate status. I think this inevitably meant that oracy was out of the mainstream and that more time needed to be spent on practice for written papers. After all, how many employers would be looking at the speaking and listening grade? How much currency does it have in the world of work?

It seemed to us that this move was a mere sop to the profession and consequently there was considerable outcry, not least because some of the students who benefited (and deserved to benefit) from the oral grade were those who found organisation of essays most difficult but thrived in situations where they could interact and discuss issues.

Practice for GCSE in the past

In the days when speaking and listening was part of the grade there was a thorough system of standardisation and moderation. The exam boards would send schools tapes showing examples of students' performance, together with the board's commentaries and moderated grades. English departments would view the recordings and discuss the performance in meetings, then carry out a moderation exercise by having a sample assessment with two teachers watching their school's students and agreeing the grades. This then would set the standard within the school. The last time I did this with my department was in 2010-2012 before we made the switch to IGCSE and before the 2015 changes. In my view it worked well and was a process of education as well as assessment. It kept up a discussion about expectations.

The switch to IGCSE and our reasons for changing

We switched to the Cambridge Assessment International Examination GCSE because of ongoing issues with the accuracy of marking by the UK board AQA – especially for English Literature – and the sheer weight of workload imposed by the controlled assessment regime.

We took Cambridge IGCSE 100% external examination courses 0500 First Language English and (at that time) 0480 English Literature from 2013. Initially we did not take the oral endorsement option because of the time it took out of lessons – three days to get through our small cohort in March at the height of the revision season. But for the past three years we have taken this component at the instigation of the Head, who was concerned about the currency value of the qualification – though not about its standard against the national qualifications. We remain convinced – and there are studies recently to confirm this view – that it is of equivalent difficulty to UK national qualifications.

Why we needed to do the oral tests

Some universities, for example Cardiff, were requiring evidence of proficiency in speaking and listening from international providers for medical degrees and some others have followed suit.

This may be because of distrust of international qualifications, even though studies have shown them to have a similar level of demand to the national ones; it may be due to other pressures on universities to conform to national qualifications; or it may be because universities want to be sure that prospective students are fluent and have the necessary sophistication orally for a career in medicine.

We have chosen to conduct the individual tests which are marked out of 40 now, and consist of an individual presentation without PowerPoint and a discussion with the teacher/examiner. These tests are recorded and stored in our school files. The exams officer ensures that they are properly labelled and sends all of them off to the exam board's Moderator along with the mark sheet which has the name of the student, their candidate number, topic and the two marks then added up.

This is actually very similar to the CSE oral exam that I first remember conducting when I started my teaching career in the mid-1980s.

It is possible to do teacher-assessed speaking and listening coursework but we felt that the tests were a more easily standardised mode of assessment and were not only minimally disruptive but would fit well with our practice lower down the school and provide opportunities for us to get the students to produce a talk for the mock on a subject of our own choosing and then break out into discussion groups. We usually supply topics for the mocks based on literature texts to help support our revision. For the actual test our students can choose any topic they like. The regulations do not permit teachers to help them, and so this makes them much more independent. We also find that having the English speaking and listening tests ahead of MFL provides good acclimatisation to this form of assessment. It is quite an ask for the students to have to do two or possibly three oral tests altogether, but they are resilient about it.

The cancellation of the exams in 2020

As I expressed in my article (<https://www.tes.com/news/do-we-need-exam-boards-any-more>), it came as a considerable shock to us that Cambridge failed to fulfil the contract for which we had paid with our exam fees: they refused to accept our Speaking and Listening centre marks and to apply their external Moderation procedure. We made several appeals to the board to do the same as they had with the written exams and accept the Centre Assessed Grade, but they would not do so.

I am happy to supply you with evidence of our correspondence with the board. I remain convinced that they have short-changed us and our students and are not willing to assist us. I feel too that they have not acted with the students' best interests at heart.

What do we do in school in KS3 and KS4?

Like many independent schools we pride ourselves on our ability to help our students find their voice. This is done in a number of ways both in the classroom and in the co-curricular programme of the school.

In English lessons, we do the following:

1. Regularly work in small groups and pairs with feedback sessions across all year groups.
2. We encourage individual contributions to class discussion.

3. Each year after Christmas we get the students to research the events of the previous year and put together a presentation which they give to the rest of their class.
4. In Year 10 we also ask them to present to the rest of the class as practice for later tests.
5. In the sixth Form we work in pairs or groups, encourage presentations and peer feedback.
6. We also have some possibility of drama in the classroom but we have drama as a separate subject which is thriving in the school.
7. For drama there are usually year group productions to which parents are invited and in which each student is given an equal part with the others. This increases confidence in performing before an audience as well as improving drama and collaborative skills.
8. We have drama at GCSE and A Level.

Co-curricular:

1. Entry to formal public speaking competitions such as Youth Speaks, the Rotary national competition. It should be emphasised that this is not an event for independent schools solely and we see the local group working hard to encourage participation from all schools in their area. Our school is happy to host this event for free. Maintained schools can do very well in this competition.
2. The Girls' Day School Trust is proud of the Chrystall Carter public speaking competition, set up in memory of one of the Trust legal personnel. One Year 11 gives a seven minute talk and answers questions from a Year 11 or Sixth Form audience.
3. There has been an inter-house competition within the school. Interestingly, when I began my teaching career I organised an inter-house event for my school, which was a 12-form-entry 13-18 comprehensive school. We also ran an inter-house drama competition. The co-curricular events which go on in independent schools are not exclusive to the private sector.

Cross-curricular

1. Every year we have an academic fortnight in which a teacher or a Sixth Form student gives a presentation on a topic derived from an EPQ or more general interest.
2. We have hustings for house captains and prefects as well as head girls. This means that each candidate addresses her house or the whole school to be elected.
3. We have cross-subject days in which students are divided into groups and given tasks, for example in DT to design some form of conveyance. This improves collaboration and other soft skills as well as the subject specific ones.

4. In a recent cross-subject event English and Science collaborated to give Year 9 an afternoon working in groups representing stakeholders debating whether or not there should be a theme park in the local area.
5. Students plan and participate in year group assemblies and whole school assemblies.

What enables independent schools to succeed in this aspect of their education provision?

1. Smaller classes
2. Whole school commitment to the value of oracy – not written but implicit which can be seen in lessons and in wider education.
3. Student behaviour and high expectations
4. Pastoral support where necessary and encouragement every time there are interim reports back to parents for students to participate in class as much as possible
5. Parental expectation and support
6. Progressive educational philosophy
7. Holistic approach – what will the whole student be capable of in the next stages of education and career?

What are the rewards?

During the Lockdown stage of the pandemic, we were able to set up seminar groups across different Trust schools for Y13 students who would now have no final A-level exam to aim for. I had a very articulate group that worked at a very high standard. This showed me how significant the educational emphasis on oracy is because it allowed us to transcend the difficulties of the fragmented school experience and to take learning online. Year 11 enrichment worked in a similar way within school. These valuable experiences show that our students were ready for university and that they had not lost out over the exams being cancelled. In fact they had gained considerably.

How are things changing as a result of the Pandemic?

1. Returning to the classroom has meant some changes in seating arrangements which make it much harder to get group work and collaboration going. Hybrid learning seems to be the worst of both worlds at the moment. When we were bringing half groups back to the classroom at the end of Lockdown we experimented with collaboration between those in the classroom and those at home.
2. Initially online education was very much delivery by teacher and some participation on the chat but as skills improved it was possible to set up small break-out groups online. These were very successful as they kept students in touch with each other and helped ameliorate the isolation that many felt.

How far is the assessment model to blame?

1. The accountability framework is too powerful and too dominant. It forces schools to concentrate too much on what can be assessed and for struggling schools this will mean a narrowing of education. Only outstanding schools or good schools can relax sufficiently to expand. League tables reinforce the exam results culture and fear of Ofsted has negative consequences. We find inspection stressful enough but if we want to succeed we have to be more adventurous in our teaching and to offer a very wide and varied educational diet to our students. A very different culture exists – but it does not have to!
2. Teachers of larger classes have a harder job it could be argued although there are colleagues in state schools who assure me that they can certainly teach in groups.
3. If speaking and listening were to be reinstated in the national qualifications this would raise the status of oracy and time would be found for teaching it.
4. However, another pressure is the pressure of time – the reformed qualifications have a larger content and require more memorisation so that absorbs teaching and learning time. It is harder to give control over to students when there is so much to cover.
5. The current speaking and listening grades are not very well-differentiated unlike the Cambridge ones. How much of an incentive is there to do well when there are only three possible grades?
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