

The National Education Union represents more than 450,000 education professionals in the UK, including the majority of teachers, across all sectors of education.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to this inquiry, which addresses deep-set problems created by the ways in which policy-makers, particularly over the last decade, have reshaped qualifications, curriculum and pedagogy. Skills of oracy have been among the casualties of this reshaping, and it is imperative that they are fully restored to health, as a central element in a broad programme of education, which can engage and develop learners at all levels.

1. The importance of a broad understanding of oracy, and its relation to talk for learning

- i. Like other respondents to the Inquiry, we would suggest that oracy – understood as the more formal and performative use of spoken language, usually in public situations – needs to be understood in the broader context of ‘talk for learning’. Talk is both a medium for learning, and an enabler of it, and there is a well-established connection between oral development, cognitive development and educational attainment. The United Kingdom has a rich and continuing tradition of educational work around these issues, from James Britton and his co-writers in the 1950s and 60s, to the Language in the National Curriculum project in the 1990s, and to the research of Debra Myhill and her colleagues in the present decade. Successive iterations of the National Curriculum recognised and drew from this work, and it is only in very recent years that it has been marginalised by policy.
- ii. Both approaches to speaking and listening are essential. Oracy is important for the development of skills, aptitudes and the confidence of students as they develop to become fully engaged citizens and young adults. Without talk, it is impossible for students to develop deeper understanding of their subjects, and to work with complex ideas.

2. The effects of recent policies on talk and oracy.

- i. The Union shares the widespread concern that present policy-mandated practice works against these understandings. A number of government measures have had adverse effects on talk and oracy:
 - The removal of speaking and listening from English GCSE assessment.
 - The effects of this removal throughout the secondary English curriculum.
 - The removal of the study of spoken language from GCSE English.
 - More generally, the tendency of policy-makers and curriculum designers at the level of the school and the Trust to overlook the value of talk in the learning process. There is instead an emphasis on teacher instruction and the input of knowledge. It is important to note that this is a culture shift which has taken place without serious engagement on the part of policy-makers with the intellectual and educational traditions on which claims about the importance of talk have rested.

- A tendency to downplay the importance of student voice and student experience, so that students' home cultures, and the languages associated with them, do not provide important resources and reference points in classroom work.

3. Good practice

- i. Talk and oracy are essential elements of every subject and phase of education. This means that developing an understanding about the importance of spoken language in learning should be an indispensable element in teacher education at all levels. By emphasising the value of talk alongside the significance of oracy, the importance of exploratory talk will be recognised, as well as the value of the more structured use of spoken language developed through oracy skills. Much talk is necessarily spontaneous and improvised, and lessons should be organised in ways that allow for the promotion of these qualities.
- ii. Alongside classroom opportunities for the development of spoken language, there should also be formal recognition of its importance. Central here is the question of assessment, and the integration of spoken language into formal qualifications, across the curriculum. Nothing would do more for the status of oracy (and talk) in schools than their inclusion in examination syllabuses, either in the form of portfolio presentations which offer examples of the use of spoken language in different situations and for different purposes, or in the form of a 'viva', in which the student's work is formally presented and opened to question by examiners.

4. The contribution of the APPG

- i. In initiating a new wave of discussion on spoken language, the APPG is making a valuable contribution to the rethinking of issues of curriculum and pedagogy. The effect of re-emphasising spoken language as a medium for learning, and a central feature of student performance and attainment would be felt throughout the school, and would be one element in the much wider programme of change which is required if we are to develop a model of the school fit for 21st century purpose.

References to work highlighted in the response

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

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

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

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

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