

Evidence to Oracy APPG from [Oracy Cambridge](#)

INTRODUCTION

In this submission, we offer evidence to support the view that:

- Oracy should be given the same status as literacy and numeracy in the school curriculum
- There are serious consequences for academic attainment, employability and social democracy if all young people are not helped to develop the spoken language skills needed to participate in a range of social situations
- The development of students' spoken language skills enables their learning and progress in all school subjects, and develops reasoning skills
- Good examples of oracy education can now be found in some British schools
- Training in oracy education should be part of initial and ongoing teacher education, in all subjects and phases
- The content of oracy education, and its assessment, can be guided by the Oracy Framework created by the University of Cambridge and Voice 21.

We have not addressed all questions set by the APPG inquiry, but have made it clear which have been addressed.

A. VALUE AND IMPACT

Q1a: Why does spoken language not have the same status as reading and writing?

Speaking and listening are difficult to assess, compared with reading and writing. Spoken language is highly context dependent and talk is ephemeral - there is no paper trail. Collecting recordings of talk is difficult.

Government policy changes have adversely affected oracy education (e.g. the removal of the speaking and listening assessment from the English GCSE). In a culture of high accountability, what is assessed is what gets done.

There is a perception that children arrive at school having already learned to talk, and that they extend their vocabulary and skills entirely naturally through casual interaction with other children, and by listening to adults. These assumptions are not supported by the evidence.

Oracy skills underpin all other learning. As [James Britton \(1970\)](#) argued: "writing floats on a sea of talk". Vocabulary learnt through talk supports better reading comprehension. The status of oracy education in schools should reflect this.

Q1b: Should it have the same status?

Absolutely! Indeed, it could be argued that oracy skills are even more important than written literacy and numeracy, since people communicate far more through spoken language than through reading and writing. Children acquire spoken language skills through experience. However the quality of childhood experience varies hugely, and so there are often significant gaps in children's oracy repertoires.

In a landmark study, [Hart and Risley \(1995\)](#) estimated that by age 3, children from higher-SES backgrounds had heard 30 million more words than children from lower-SES backgrounds. Other studies report links between the quality of early language experience and later academic success (e.g. [Hoff, 2006](#)). A study by [Romeo et al \(2018\)](#) confirmed this trend and used brain scanning to reveal that exposure to conversational turn-taking influences the development of children's language processing. The implication is that children who do not have sufficiently rich language experience suffer emotionally, socially, intellectually and academically. The best way to improve their life outcomes is through direct oracy education in school.

There are many programmes in schools that seek to close gaps in literacy and numeracy skills, but few that focus on spoken language skills. We know that when oracy education is explicitly taught, these gaps can be closed in a relatively short period of time ([Mercer & Dawes, 2018](#)). One study ([Clarke et al, 2013](#)) showed long-term improvements in reading comprehension for children following an oral language approach. It is therefore vital that schools view oracy as being equally important to literacy and numeracy.

Q1c. If so, why?

There is robust evidence that the most vulnerable children in our society, including children in areas of disadvantage, looked after children and those with SEN are at high risk of having poor spoken language. We also know that the quality and amount of talk children experience in the early years is a powerful predictor of their future life outcomes. In a recent report for the Welsh government ([Mercer & Mannion, 2018](#)), we identified three broad categories of benefits that accrue from oracy education: cognitive outcomes (improved curriculum learning and reasoning skills), social and emotional outcomes (self-esteem, empathy, ability to deal with stress), and life outcomes (overcoming social disadvantage, fewer exclusions and juvenile offending, improved future earnings). For all children, and especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, oracy education brings substantial benefits in these three categories. It strengthens equality of opportunity and helps raise academic standards.

Q2. What are the consequences if children and young people do not receive oracy education?

Oracy education does not only mean teaching children ways to talk that will help them to do well in future job interviews or work settings. It means teaching children the spoken language skills that will enable them to make the most of the education they are offered in their classrooms every day. Children who have never been taught how to listen attentively, question ideas or shape their own

thoughts into speech cannot be expected to know how to do so. The most important medium through which adults teach and children learn is spoken language. For too many children, the spoken language of teachers is a barrier to learning. Good, inclusive oracy education provides children with the speaking and listening skills they need to think and learn. Children who do not receive oracy education are the most likely to fail in our schools, undermining their life chances and perpetuating a cycle of disadvantage and poverty. This is well documented by evidence around the impact of poor language, which has not improved over the past 10 years ([Communication Trust, 2017](#)).

We know that oracy education is important from birth, both in the home and early years settings. A report by the EEF gathered evidence around identifying and supporting children's early language ([Law et al. 2017](#)). Due to its huge impact, the [Early Intervention Foundation \(2017\)](#) have called for early language development to be prioritised as a child wellbeing indicator. Disadvantaged children do less well when assessed on the core 'Communication and Language' element of the Early Years Framework. The [National Literacy Trust \(2016\)](#) reports that in the three assessed areas of Listening and Attention, Understanding, and Speaking, 77%, 76% and 75% of disadvantaged children in each area respectively attained the expected level in 2015. The data for children who do not receive free school meals shows attainment of 87%, 86% and 86% respectively in the assessed areas. Therefore, disadvantaged children begin their primary education at a deficit. Children with SLCN are misunderstood and poorly identified in our schools, often being misidentified as having literacy or learning needs, resulting in poorer outcomes ([Bercow Report, 2008](#); [Bercow 10, 2018](#)). Oracy education is also incredibly important for bilingual children, an issue we discuss at length in the [Oracy Across the Welsh Curriculum](#) report.

Q4. How can it help deliver the wider curriculum at school?

There is strong evidence from recent large-scale, classroom-based research that when children are encouraged and enabled to take part in thinking conversations in the classroom, using talk to elaborate ideas and examine them critically, they make better progress in English, Science and Maths ([Alexander, 2018](#); [Howe et al., 2019](#)). Another recent study found that an oracy-based Learning to Learn curriculum, which involved over 400 taught lessons over a 3-year period, led to significant gains in subject learning across the curriculum, with accelerated gains among children from disadvantaged backgrounds ([Mannion, McAllister and Mercer, 2018](#)).

Q5. 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?

It is well understood that spoken language skills (or the lack of them) are a significant determinant of future employability and future earnings ([Ashley, 2015](#); [de Vries and Rentfrow, 2016](#)). The evidence shows that children with poor vocabulary skills at age 5 are more likely to be unemployed ([Law et al., 2017](#)). Studies of what employers look for in new recruits invariably emphasise the ability to work well with others in a team (e.g. see [NESTA, 2017](#)).

Q8. How can the ability to communicate effectively contribute to engaging more young people from all backgrounds to become active citizens?

Currently, few schools outside the private sector offer training in public speaking and debating for their students. It is well known that many adults find speaking in public stressful and difficult. Unless they have opportunities to develop the confidence and skills to engage in public discourse, people find it difficult to engage actively in political life, at a local or national level. It is therefore vital that oracy education is included in the mainstream curriculum of all schools.

B. PROVISION AND ACCESS

Q1. What should high quality oracy education look like?

Spoken language skills need to be taught explicitly, which means giving oracy curriculum time. This requires a shift in perspective from viewing oracy not only as a pedagogical concern (learning *through* talk), but also as a curriculum concern (learning *to* talk). When oracy skills are taught explicitly, this leads to significant gains in subject learning, and is especially beneficial for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g. see [Mannion, 2018](#)).

High quality oracy education should be guided by the [Oracy Skills Framework](#) created by the University of Cambridge and Voice 21. It provides a clear specification of the range of skills that are involved in effective spoken language use and has related teaching and assessment materials for teachers.

It should be inclusive, taking account of our most vulnerable children with poor language, whether due to limited experience or a developmental language disorder.

It should be taught by skilled practitioners.

Q3. What are the views of teachers, school leaders and educational bodies regarding the current provision of oracy education?

The current provision of oracy education is patchy. In those schools where teachers have received training and have management support for oracy education, children can put the relevant skills to good use in their everyday learning. Historically, although many teachers are convinced of the power of oracy education, little time has been allocated to teaching or making use of the skills of speaking and listening.

In recent years, there has been a groundswell of interest in oracy. Teachers understand that powerful teaching and learning requires good relationships with students, which are built through talk. Oracy is not explicitly referenced in the new Ofsted framework. However, there is evidence that Ofsted inspectors value oracy education, as can be seen in the following excerpts from Ofsted reports:

“Standards in speaking and listening are high. Pupils enjoy discussing their ideas in class, and listen well to each other. This was seen to great effect in a Year 6 lesson when pupils presented their own research work about countries around the world. They enjoyed responding with skill to high-quality questioning from their teacher and fellow pupils.”
([Outstanding](#))

“Pupils’ skills in the full range of subjects are limited, such as their enquiry, questioning and hypothesising skills. This is because some teachers themselves lack the subject knowledge required to teach these skills. As a result, high-quality cross-curricular learning was seen rarely. This restricts the acquisition and application of skills in new and varied contexts.”
([Requires Improvement](#))

If Ofsted made it much clearer to their inspectors and to schools that oracy education is a valued aspect of a school’s provision, this would help to raise its status - and would help children to learn to discuss and explain their learning.

C. BARRIERS

Q1. What are the barriers that teachers face in providing quality oracy education?

Significant barriers are: lack of leadership for oracy initiatives; lack of dedicated curriculum time; lack of training in oracy education in initial and ongoing teacher training; little recognition of the importance of spoken language and the need for oracy skills to be explicitly taught.

Teachers report that a crowded curriculum means limited time. The paradox is that there is strong evidence that children taught discussion skills can learn more effectively, as outlined above. Making time requires strong leadership in a culture of high accountability.

There may be a lack of communication across departments and across year groups; talk skills are undervalued by students if there is inconsistency in teaching approaches and expectations within a school.

There are significant challenges in teaching oracy skills to teenagers who may have been required to be quiet in classrooms for most of their schooling. Student perceptions that speaking in lessons can create social problems can effectively halt talk. Also, teachers may not quite know what to expect of individual students working in groups. The solution is that oracy education needs to start in reception class and be incremental, constant and provide progression. Teachers may fear 'lack of control' if students are encouraged to discuss ideas. However, research has shown that as oracy skills develop, students are able to take increasing responsibility for their behaviour ([Mercer, 2014](#)).

Q2. What support do teachers need to improve the delivery of oracy education?

Even teachers who are convinced of the need for oracy education may not know enough about spoken language development and how it can be taught, or the range of skills required for different speech situations. Such knowledge should be part of all initial teacher education. It can also be provided through professional development opportunities for existing teachers, such as that currently offered by Oracy Cambridge, Voice 21 and many other organisations. The active, positive support of senior leadership in schools is essential so that productive classroom talk is valued and teachers are enabled to share best practice with each other.

Q3. What accountability is currently present in the system? How can we further incentivise teachers to deliver more oracy education to children and young people?

Oracy education needs to be specified more clearly and in more detail than in the current National Primary Curriculum. Currently, the guidance for teachers on providing oracy education is not sufficient, despite the curriculum highlighting the importance of spoken language “cognitively, socially and linguistically” (DfE, 2013). The Spoken Language skills breakdown and expectations for pupils are not well delineated, with a single page of guidance covering years 1 to 6, so that teachers are not supported in planning activities which will develop pupils’ oracy skills. This contrasts with other subjects, which have a detailed year-by-year breakdown so that teachers know what to teach and how to build on pupils skills and identify needs, including for disadvantaged pupils.

In secondary education, oracy skills should be an explicit and substantial part of the English curriculum. The importance of oracy for learning should also be properly recognised in the teaching of other subjects, as it is with literacy, numeracy and ICT skills.

Q5 What is the role of assessment in increasing provision of oracy education? What is the most appropriate form of assessment of oracy skills?

Formative assessment:

Assessment should be immediate, formative and part of everyday teaching of oracy skills. Students and teachers should be taught to provide immediate supportive and informative feedback to encourage confidence and motivation. Assessment of curriculum subjects in which oracy is used to good effect can provide insight into the oracy skills of individual students. Improved knowledge among class teachers would ensure they can identify and analyse students’ oracy skills more accurately.

Summative assessment:

If oracy were assessed as part of high-stakes end of course assessments (e.g. GCSEs) it would be taken more seriously in schools, and curriculum time and resources would be duly allocated. But oracy is hard to assess due to the contextualised and ephemeral nature of the evidence, and the time and expertise needed to collect it. There is also a danger that oracy could become narrowed to what can be more easily assessed, e.g. presentations rather than group discussions.

However, the key difficulty (and one of the reasons Speaking and Listening was removed from GCSE English grading) is the highly subjective nature of marker judgements which results in low reliability of scores. If we are prepared to accept low reliability in essay and performance subjects (which we currently tolerate) then it is worth re-thinking whether we can accept this for oracy. We can also look to alternative assessment methods such as Comparative Judgement which have the potential for more reliable scores.

Q6. Are the speaking and listening elements of the current curriculum sufficient in order to deliver high quality oracy education?

No (see QC3 above). There has been a lack of focus on talk in the English National Curriculum since 1995. The current statutory orders give talk a place primarily as a means of learning and developing reading and writing skills. There is insufficient attention and direction for talk as a means of learning across the curriculum. There is also a lack of recognition regarding the teaching of oracy skills in their own right, explicitly and directly, as well as seeing them as a means to enhancing subject knowledge.

Q7. What is the best approach – more accountability within the system or a less prescriptive approach?

Prescription was attempted in the first iterations of the National Curriculum (1988-1994) with detailed programmes of study, attainment targets and assessment guidance. The development of detailed assessment guidelines and methodology for oracy (Assessing Pupil Performance) in the period 2000-2011 proved ineffective. APP was cumbersome and time-consuming, which contributed to the decline of spoken language. A 'less prescriptive' approach, but still involving some central guidance on teaching methods, planning approaches and formative assessment, is probably the best approach. Oracy needs to be given status; evidence of its value needs to be made easily available to all; but the teaching approaches and school provision should be left to schools and groups of schools to decide. Our current work with schools indicates that there is an appetite for oracy that doesn't need to be prescribed from the centre. However, teachers and schools should not be left to decide whether to teach it or not.