

Summary:

- This article intends to explain my own experience as a recipient of 'bolt-on' speaking and listening throughout my academic career
- I have included my experience and professional opinion on different approaches as a secondary-school teacher
- Having foregrounded the explicit teaching of vocabulary through oracy, specifically over the last twelve months, I have sought to explain the impact I feel that it has had so far.

1. I write this piece having completed another lively day of teaching at a successful secondary school in Accrington, Lancashire. A teenage boy, as if on cue, has just referred to me as being 'posh'. I asked him to elaborate. He couldn't. He wasn't being rude or unpleasant; he simply did not have the ability to coherently articulate the point he so desperately wanted to make. Having explained that principle of upwardly converging (speaking appropriately for your audience is how he eventually reconciled the concept), the message could not have been clearer. This led me to wonder whether pupils often see 'talk' or 'posh' talk as something alien and wholly separated from their learning and their education. If this is true, then we have to address the question: at what point do pupils begin to think that classroom talk is of little or no benefit to them? When do they begin to think that there is some sort of disparity between what they say and what they learn? More worryingly, where do they get this idea from?

### **Value and Impact**

2. The impact of oracy can be difficult to evidence when it comes to children's learning. When oracy works and the undeniable empowering of pupils happens, the results are immediate and contagious. However, without careful and considered planning, 'talk' lessons can be less fruitful. More forthright characters can dominate, often to the detriment of the more reserved characters who would perhaps benefit the most. Additionally, behavioural issues can often occur when children are given what they perceive to be 'freedom' in the classroom, and with so much work for teachers to cover in so little time, some may feel there is little point to 'talking' and wasting time. The curriculum in our current education system is knowledge rich and the content can seem to be somewhat overwhelming. As a result, oracy, or 'speaking and listening' as it is often referred to, can take an understandable back-seat.
3. Now, to clarify, I am certainly not 'posh', which is in itself is a subjective and unhelpful term. It is important to note, however, that I am from a Northern, working-class background. I do not come from what would not be considered to be a 'professional' <sup>1</sup>household. Although I am now a mother, teacher and gradually-reformed 'talker', I nervously avoided talking as I tentatively made my way through the state education system from 1989 to 1994. From then on, I completed A Levels and eventually gained a First Class Honours Degree in English from Manchester University. Of course I was delighted on the day of graduation: I had gained the top classification, the opportunities were endless, and I whole-heartedly believed that the sky did not have to be the limit. But did my academic success ultimately empower me for the workplace? In some ways, of course it did. I acquired the knowledge and the skills required to write creatively, analytically and with confidence. Crucially, however, when the time came to apply for jobs and compete against others for a teaching position that I had dreamed of, it

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<sup>1</sup> Alex Quigley (2018). *Closing the Vocabulary Gap*. Oxon: Routledge.

was evident to me that my skills of verbal expression and my ability to speak sufficiently and coherently in a pressurised environment were somewhat lacking. I went to several interviews before I was offered a post; the feedback from potential employers usually following the pattern that the successful candidate had 'better developed answers' than I did.

4. Looking back, I realise now that I had at least some awareness that my verbal repertoire may have been relatively limited. I knew that my spoken expression did not match the expression I used in my writing. As a lifelong avid reader, I felt I had a solid command of vocabulary and a healthy curiosity when it came to the process of understanding and using ambitious language. I just hid it very well. Why? Like the teenagers in many of my classes, I did not equate speaking with learning. I was not taught that continued, purposeful speaking is evidence of continued thinking. 'Speaking and Listening' has been a consistent feature of the curriculum in one form or another for many years, but it has been packaged and presented as a 'bolt-on' to the much more essential and evidence-rich written form. In my personal academic journey (and even at university), speaking was always presented and received like an extra topping on a pizza – there would be sufficient flavour without it but once it's added, the whole thing is a much better-tasting product. Without trying to wrap something so vital up in clichés, we need to mix in the topping at a much earlier stage.

#### **Provision and Access**

5. To accept the 'bolt on' approach, as we have for many years, undervalues the importance of skills required in the workplace such as collaboration, innovation and articulation. I would argue, however, that we are beginning to see something of a revival for oracy, with more energy in the drive behind the delivery and teaching of oracy in the classroom. Oracy is not an initiative – it is nothing new and this is not the first time that strategies have been discussed nationally. This time, however, we as professionals are privy to some very real and brutal statistics about the limited opportunities and outcomes that await children- specifically those from under-privileged backgrounds- when they leave school. This year in particular there has been a wave of research into meta-cognition, alongside Alex Quigley's research on the vocabulary gap, and a heightened sense of urgency has consequently become evident within the teaching community. We are seeing a rise in activity of organisations such as 'Voice 21', and strategies to embed and increase the profile of classroom talk are being widely discussed and trialled through teacher training sessions and through networking meetings. Oracy is a learned process, and it must therefore be taught, and those who can see the evidence of its impact should impart its benefits in abundance.
6. Within this context, a class of pupils who have been successfully practising and perfecting oracy should be easy to identify and locate. They should, in theory, gradually develop purposeful skills over time, although the shift in the dynamic of the class should be subtle. As a secondary school teacher, I can with confidence say that many of the pupils I teach would happily identify themselves as talkers. In the majority of cases, those pupils will be boys – and in most cases, they will be the boys who will dominate the classroom if they are given the opportunity (which is ironic given the long-standing and widely-acknowledged fact that girls consistently outperform boys). These classes are typically easy to identify because they can include pupils who are widely and often affectionately referred to as 'characters'. In my experience, these pupils are the most captive audience, because even though their talk is not always purposeful, their self-belief and confidence in their views tends to be fairly strong. In my teaching, I have recently adapted and reworked my lessons, seeking to refine their use of

talk, to even out the imbalance and the subtle hierarchy within the classroom setting. It is possible to strengthen the whole body of pupils by manoeuvring the way they talk, and ultimately empower the more reserved pupils who will rise to the challenge and step up if they are given a safe space to be heard.

7. High quality, structured oracy transcends socio-economic factors, gender imbalance, and specific physical and emotional needs of pupils we work with. In my classroom, I specify clear expectations along a clear sense of aspiration. I try to balance purpose with pride and wherever possible, I display evidence of successful oracy that is taking place in my classroom. Standard English is adhered to, and although fillers such as 'like' have invited some negative press attention recently, my view is that children pause when children think: silence is unnerving for teenagers who are speaking in public for the first time. They can often 'catastrophise' their circumstances, leading them to fear the quietness that they have to command; when pupils are asked to speak alone in front of their peers, the ideal circumstances should be for them to have practised speaking in front of others many, many times before. In our current educational system, this consistent, habitual talk is not encouraged enough – in some cases pupils speak when they have to, and unfortunately for some, this can be as late as six months before their external GCSE examinations. This is a flaw and it needs to be addressed.
8. Perhaps more significantly, children from more deprived economic backgrounds struggle significantly with 'patterning' and their ability to recall vocabulary that they haven't been exposed to consistently throughout their lives is somewhat limited. They lack a cognitive trigger that enables them to reply upon a word that they have experienced using before, and in some cases, pupils have never seen nor heard specific words. If a filler or a voiced pause shows that they are attempting to recall a word that will aid their expression, then fair game, as it were. The more we teach oracy, the more children will experience exposure to vocabulary and their ability to recall will be strengthened. I personally want to avoid falling into the role of the 'expert' – whereby I am discouraging thinking because the evidence of it and the way it presents itself in a teenager is so wholly different from the way I might demonstrate thinking. We must be mindful of our own 'blindspots' as professionals, and in the same way good pedagogical routines include modelling writing, we must also model talking. The majority of teachers have arrived at a comfortable, practised position where we can present without fillers and without voices pauses, but for many of us, we have time on our side. In my opinion, voiced pauses within the context of oracy are cognitive processes equivalent to drafting and correcting a piece of writing. Both are evidence of thinking and both should be championed.

### **Barriers**

9. I entered the professional workplace with a distinct disadvantage. My socio economic status and the academic background of my parents meant that, statistically<sup>2</sup>, the amount of vocabulary I had access to would have been much more limited than some of my peers at the comprehensive school I attended. In a state of blissful ignorance, I achieved good grades in my written exams but went completely to pieces when I had to complete a short speech in front of the people in my English class. The physical and emotional impact that the experience had on my immediate well-being was clear. There was the worried build-up, the misunderstanding of feeling the compulsory nature of the activity, shaking, sweating, and the

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<sup>2</sup> Alex Quigley (2018). *Closing the Vocabulary Gap*. Oxon: Routledge.

feeling of humiliation and sheer panic when, mid-presentation, I dropped my carefully-ordered cue cards on the floor. I either had a subliminal sense about my lack of ability when speaking, or the concept of speaking confidently was so utterly alien to me that I felt exposed, powerless and inept. Today, like many of my colleagues, I am more experienced, but those concerns still lie beneath the surface and can occasionally be a threat to my performance when speaking in public. My concern today is that as teachers and professionals we could be still perpetuating this unhelpful and unproductive way of addressing talk – because it is something that, as teachers, we only have to do at the mercy of our chosen exam board. In our classrooms, we need to be facilitators of oracy and avoid the assumption that purposeful talk is something that just 'happens' to us as we grow.

10. We cannot avoid the inescapable fact that as educators, we have to work diligently in order to ensure our pupils hit aspirational targets against which we are thoroughly measured. And these measurements require evidence. If pupils are using oracy successfully, the evidence for this can be difficult to collate. How can we demonstrate that pupils have made progress if nothing is written down? Our education system is data-rich and the progress pupils are expected to make is measured against this wealth of helpful and varied information. It will come as little surprise that many of us do not know of a single teacher who went into the profession because they dream of data and jump at the thought of tracking pupils against fluctuating national statistics. Teachers have always been encouraged to provide evidence of both formative and summative assessment – typically these are presented in written form, whether that be in an exercise book or an end-of-topic test. Therefore, in order to assess where a pupil is on their expected 'flight path', we must give them some level of challenging work and mark it. That said, the marvellous marketing campaigns of recent years that underpin and promote the 'Those that can, teach' approach have only served to wrap pedagogy in a fairytale-like packet that makes a tough and challenging vocation appear simple to master. Today, depending on which publications you read, the teaching profession is in 'crisis' as retention is at an all-time low. With that in mind, significant changes or recommendations for classroom practice need to be presented carefully and with the wellbeing of all concerned at the forefront. So, how can embedding oracy more widely become a practical reality - especially when, as teachers, we are often asked to evidence the learning that our pupils are experiencing? How can we promote the message that oracy is formative, that it is valuable and it is worth teachers' precious time?
11. The assessment of oracy, albeit somewhat subjective, is instant. Purposeful oracy requires evaluative and comparative thinking, it requires relational awareness and it can often be based on a willingness to challenge or build upon the thinking of others. If disputes arise and the standard of classroom talk begins to drop, then fantastic – we might have some pupils who clearly have something to learn. Due to the immediate nature of oracy, pupils are asked to challenge themselves and develop skills they were not aware they needed. We are asking pupils to rely upon a level of thinking that would sit fairly proudly at the top of Bloom's Taxonomy. If we as teachers become accountable for oracy in our classrooms, then I believe that its teaching will become more valuable and ultimately sustainable. If we assess oracy earlier (particularly at Key Stage 3 within the secondary school system), both professionals and pupils will become aware of a certain baseline from which progress can be made. We currently have reasonable measures or accepted standards in several other areas of education such as spelling, grammar, reading and writing; I have been actively teaching and embedding oracy for the last twelve months (even I am still learning) but as yet, I am not aware of where this baseline would actually lie. I have been setting 'talk' homework pieces

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with a view to engaging parents, engaging in challenging talk lessons where pupils are allocated specific roles within specific groups, I have energised my classroom with evidence of challenging vocabulary that pupils have used, and in truth, at least a quarter of each of my lessons involves focussed, purposeful talk. The experience is invigorating and energising for both me and my pupils, and slowly but surely, many of the strategies I am using are spreading across school and into other departments. Talk is formative, and when pupils talk, listening happens. This is what oracy looks like, and also what it feels like. It works and its presence within lesson planning does not add to the already-generous workload that teachers have. Prioritising oracy will take time and considerable planning, but in the current climate where Ofsted are encouraging webbing of skills in the 'year of the curriculum' and promoting the imparting of 'cultural capital' upon our pupils, the time for oracy to shine is now. Classroom talk should be given sufficient weighting in our schemes of work, and in the same way we have been encouraged in pedagogical circles to evidence 'Literacy across the Curriculum', now is the time for 'Oracy across the Curriculum'. The key difference, I believe, is that the latter is more suitable to equip pupils with the social and functional skills needed to serve the community and interact purposefully in the workplace. In changing the climate of our curriculum, we need to address the preconception that change equals extra work for our colleagues, and so we must add curriculum time, assessment, a sense of value and 'kudos' to the process of talk. I personally have seen a transformation in the pupils I have worked with and there has been a collective, metaphorical rising of the shoulders in my classroom - I am enthused by the fact that the pupils are definitely not yet the 'finished product'. It is time to give oracy its voice.