

# SecEd

THE VOICE FOR **SECONDARY EDUCATION**

SUPPLEMENT March 2025

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## A best practice guide to teaching oracy in schools

Everyone is talking about oracy, but how can secondary schools develop young people's oracy skills and what does best practice actually look like? This 21-page SecEd supplement takes a deep dive into everything that oracy education entails – including developing a culture of oracy, disciplinary oracy, vocabulary teaching, CPD, assessment of oracy and much more. Look inside for lots of advice, practical ideas, lessons learned and case studies of oracy in action

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# Let's make change happen

The report of the Independent Commission on the Future of Oracy Education in England has set out a strong case for why oracy must become the fourth R...

*"Children are the living messages we send to a time we do not see."*

Last year, I was privileged to chair the Independent Commission on the Future of Oracy Education in England. Part of my task was to take this strange word "oracy" and to reclaim it, helping us all to see why it is just as important as literacy and numeracy. Indeed, perhaps more so.

So over six months, my fellow commissioners and I pored over evidence submitted by teachers, school leaders, academics and charity leaders, heard from leading voices within the oracy education space, and deliberated how best to secure a systemic and generational shift in access to oracy education – or, as I like to put it, to make oracy matter.

In October, we published our final report – *We need to talk* – setting out a series of practical recommendations the government should take to move oracy more centrally into the experience of all young people in their journey through education.

Since then, I have been talking to teachers, education leaders, officials and ministers about the report's recommendations and making the case for why oracy should sit alongside reading, writing and arithmetic as the

**Geoff Barton**

*...is chairman of the Independent Commission on the Future of Oracy Education in England. Visit <https://oracyeducationcommission.co.uk>*

fourth R – an essential, foundational building block, supporting our young people on their journey towards fulfilling adult lives.

As I have been making this case, I have found myself coming back to the oddly haunting quotation above from author and educator Neil Postman. Its implication: if children are the living messages we send to a time we do not see – which I profoundly believe they are – then what are the messages we want them to carry? What knowledge, what skills, what values, what dispositions? And that is where oracy education plays its part.

Ours is an increasingly fractured and fractious society, where a mixture of technological change, pervasive anxiety and self-doubt, and shifting social and cultural patterns are impacting how we live together and relate to one another.

Against this turbulent backdrop, oracy – by which I mean articulating ideas, developing understanding, and engaging with

others through speaking, listening and communication – is a vitally important skill.

## Now more than ever...

Through oracy education young people learn to confidently share their perspectives – and, crucially, listen to the perspectives of others, advocate for their beliefs, and participate fully in the conversations that shape their world. And so, in prioritising oracy, we send to the future not just messages, but messengers equipped to ask thoughtful questions, construct compelling arguments, listen actively and critically and, crucially, disagree agreeably with one another. What better legacy to leave for future generations?

But despite the importance of oracy, our commission found that access to high-quality oracy education remains inconsistent. While excellent oracy practice exists in many schools – empowering young people to learn to, through and about speaking, listening, and communication – the national picture is patchy.

To rectify this we urge the government to ensure oracy is an entitlement in every child's education in a number of practical ways – making oracy a core aspect of education from early years to post-16; building oracy into teacher development and training; promoting evidence-based approaches to oracy; reflecting the value of oracy in assessment and accountability.

## Let's not wait

But, of course, if oracy education matters, we don't need a mandate from government to endorse it.

There is plenty that you, as teachers and school leaders, can do to develop oracy in your classroom or across your school or trust. Many great schools and trusts are already supporting students' communication and talk for learning through explicit

*If you agree that oracy needs to matter more, what practical steps can you take to ensure that every young person benefits from a high-quality oracy education? ”*

teaching and opportunities to engage in classroom talk.

Change is possible – even within the constraints of our current overburdened education system.

## So here's the challenge...

If you agree that oracy needs to matter more, what practical steps can you take to ensure that every young person benefits from a high-quality oracy education which enriches their educational experience and enables them to thrive as friends, citizens and workers when they leave school?

How do we equip the next generation to be the living messengers to a time we shall not see? With educational and social change in the air, let's do more than talk about great oracy. Let's make it happen.

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## THE SECED PODCAST



**How to teach oracy skills in the secondary classroom:** This episode of the SecEd Podcast, featuring two secondary schools and charity Voice 21, focused on practical advice and ideas for the teaching of oracy skills. Listen back now via <https://buff.ly/3D1Z6p>

# The case for oracy education

What is oracy education and why are oracy skills so crucial to improving students' attainment, confidence, and wider life chances?

Oracy is the effective use of spoken language (Wilkinson, 1965). It involves three kinds of learning:

1. Learning through talk – teacher-led talk and thinking together with peers to explore problems and create ideas.
2. Learning how to talk with confidence, skill and effect.
3. Learning about talk and its roles in society and learning.

Oracy means developing students' abilities to use spoken language well for learning in school and for their lives beyond. It has been shown to significantly close gaps for groups who historically underachieve (Mannion & McAllister, 2020).

Oracy is important because talk is at the heart of how we think and learn. Years of observation of children developing skills, knowledge – and speech – through interactions with others led psychologist Lev Vygotsky to place participation in spoken interaction (listening, speaking, thinking together) at the heart of his widely accepted theory of children's cognitive development and of how we construct new knowledge and skills – how we learn through our interactions with other people.

Talking and thinking are intimately connected. Our thoughts can become conscious through talk (aloud with others or silently in our heads).

Participating in conversations that explore new knowledge and develop understanding is key to learning. For many young people, school is the only place that can provide such a wide range of vital conversational experiences.

Learning happens when students are mentally engaging with and exploring new subject matter using the specific-subject language needed to think through the content. This means actively exploring, probing, hypothesising; testing for understanding; reasoning, challenging, building on ideas, justifying, and

concluding – “thinking together” (Littleton & Mercer, 2013). Through exploratory talk, collaborating brains can all learn more than any individual could alone (Barnes & Todd, 1977). However, in many secondary lessons students spend an average of 10 seconds talking purposefully (Sedova et al, 2019).

## The oracy classroom

We need to adjust how we teach, creating more opportunities for students to use talk to engage and wrestle with the new knowledge and skills we want them to construct into new understanding.

Sometimes these opportunities can be created by dialogic teaching. Children who are regularly given the opportunity to elaborate their ideas and question what they hear perform significantly better than others in national tests (Howe et al, 2019).

Groups of students given the opportunity to reason together about why the moon changes shape, followed by an authoritative teacher exposition, understood and could recall the mechanics of the process longer term and with greater accuracy than those given the exposition alone (Mercer et al, 2004).

Oracy classrooms establish “ground rules” for talk – so everyone contributes with reasons, feels safe, is listened-to, and strives for agreed outcomes. Studies show such classrooms significantly boost achievement (EEF, 2017). Of course, they also allow time for teachers to listen to what students' exploratory talk is revealing about their thinking and misconceptions as well as giving golden moments for assessing whether children are on track.

Teachers can also purposefully demonstrate and model subject-specific, concept-related language in use. Hearing technical language being used in a context where it makes immediate sense aids students' vocabulary development and understanding (Mercer & Dawes, 2024).

**Dr Peter Dudley**

*...is a life fellow at Hughes Hall, University of Cambridge, and a founding member of Oracy Cambridge. Visit <https://oracycambridge.org/>*

Through oracy education, students become conscious of the importance of high-quality talk for learning through productive interaction. They can discuss teachers' feedback, relate their work to success criteria, and self-assess. They can express ideas and arguments with greater clarity and challenge weak arguments with adept reasoning.

School-wide debating, public speaking and drama events strengthen and reinforce a positive oracy climate, but oracy activity in subject lessons is vital. Evaluations of oracy education in practice suggest that it is most effective when every teacher in every subject follows a school-wide policy of exploiting opportunities to use talk productively (Dudley & Mercer, 2019).

And participating in spoken language conversations is a pre-requisite for interacting with written texts – more than 50 years ago, James Britton (1970) pointed out that reading and writing “float on a sea of talk”.

All students are entitled to oracy education, including those with speech, language, sensory and learning disabilities who can be supported to participate in conversations inclusively. They can learn how to adapt the ways they talk to suit any social situation: to appreciate how switches in code and register can aid meaning and nuance, while still recognising the value of every accent and dialect.

Many oracy skills are not language-specific and so oracy education provides excellent support for students learning with English as an additional language, too.

## Empowering students

I have pointed to evidence that oracy education benefits the learning of all students, and indeed, helps close attainment gaps between all students and those from groups who statistically underachieve. This, as well as promoting the development of confident articulate young people, is the prime reason we need oracy education for all.

Embedding oracy in classroom life enhances the quality of classroom learning and the life chances of students, whom it empowers as skilled and confident people who learn collaboratively and individually – in school and beyond.

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- ▶ EEF: *Dialogic teaching*, 2017: <https://buff.ly/4kflJfM>
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- ▶ Wilkinson: *The concept of Oracy*, *Educational Review* (17,4), 1965.

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# So, how do we define oracy...

What do we actually mean when we talk about oracy skills and education? Oracy teaching and learning consists of three interrelated, overlapping and mutually reinforcing elements...

Oracy has rarely been far from the headlines in the last couple of years. Yet, for all this debate, there has been little consensus on what oracy actually is.

So, what is oracy and where did the term come from? The term was first coined by academic Andrew Wilkinson in the 1960s to raise the profile of spoken language and listening by giving oracy the same status as literacy and numeracy, which were already accepted as key objects of study in education.

It captures the essential need for talk (just as one needs to be literate or numerate) and couples it with the idea that it is a skill that can be acquired through teaching.

In the 1965 book *Spoken English*, Andrew Wilkinson defined oracy as “general ability in the oral skills”. However, he was keen to stress that he had merely given oracy a name. The task ahead, he believed, was to further define it, to discover the best ways of teaching it, and to link this to work being done in other areas, such as literacy.

Further defining oracy, however, proved more of a challenge, provoking much discussion among academics and practitioners.

A significant step forward came last year with the Oracy Education Commission’s report *We need to talk* (2024), which proposed a working definition that oracy can be defined as: “Articulating ideas, developing understanding and engaging with others through speaking, listening and communication.”

The definition includes the term “communication” to recognise that not everyone communicates using spoken language and that some children may articulate ideas, develop understanding, and engage with others through sign language or augmentative communication devices.

A focus on oracy should affirm and celebrate these differences in communication. Nobody should be excluded.

Further, this definition does not privilege one form of spoken language over another, it does not emphasise “standard English” over other forms of English, indeed it does not emphasise English. Oracy skills can be developed in all languages.

This is important as oracy has faced criticism from some for promoting practices which exclude young people from marginalised backgrounds who may speak in non-standard dialects.

Instead this definition is broad and expansive, focusing on cultivating students’ ability to express themselves, engage with different perspectives, and learn through educationally productive talk. But what does this look like in practice?

As outlined in *We need to talk*, oracy education comprises three interrelated, overlapping, and mutually reinforcing elements:

- **Learning to talk, listen and communicate** – the development of speaking, listening and communication skills.
- **Learning through talk, listening and communication** – the use of talk or dialogue to foster and deepen learning.
- **Learning about talk, listening and communication** – building knowledge and understanding of speaking, listening and communication in its many contexts.

## Learning to...

This element requires that students are explicitly taught speaking, listening, and communication skills in school. The Oracy Framework, developed by Voice 21 and Oracy Cambridge (2015) categorises the oracy skills young people need into four distinct but interconnected strands.

- **Physical strand:** The physical elements of speaking and listening – your gestures, body language, facial expressions, as well as how you vary your

“These skills require explicit teaching. However, they do not need to be confined to discrete oracy lessons”

tone, pitch, pace and volume of speaking.

- **Linguistic strand:** The words we choose to use and how we bring these together through speech.
- **Cognitive strand:** Relates to organising thoughts and ideas – selecting content, structuring responses, and building on other people’s ideas.
- **Social and emotional strand:** Concerns confidence and interpersonal interactions, including how we conduct ourselves within a group, present ourselves to an audience, and listen effectively to others.

These skills require explicit teaching. However, they do not need to be confined to discrete oracy lessons. Instead, they can be effectively developed through subject teaching across the curriculum, which is why all teachers are teachers of oracy.

## Learning through...

This element refers to how teachers use spoken language to enhance learning in their classrooms. Robust research evidence shows that providing children with opportunities to engage in high-quality classroom dialogue can improve attainment and deepen curriculum mastery (EEF, 2017; Howe et al, 2019).

However, as Professor Robin Alexander, a leading advocate of dialogic teaching, has explained: “Although talk is a universal feature of classroom life, talk of the quality required (for dialogic

teaching) is not universal. Making it happen requires skill and training.” (Oracy Education Commission, 2024).

For this reason, the commission recommended that equipping all teachers with the skills to use dialogue and discussion effectively should be a priority in both initial teacher training and on-going CPD, across all educational phases and subject disciplines.

## Learning about...

This element has traditionally received less attention. However, its inclusion highlights the importance of helping young people to make informed decisions about how they speak by developing their understanding of spoken language in all its forms.

This knowledge enables them to appreciate why people communicate differently, fostering respect for these differences, while also building their critical awareness – allowing them, for example, to recognise and challenge language discrimination. At Voice 21, we embed this aspect of oracy education within learning to talk, listen, and communicate as it provides the foundation for making conscious and effective choices about our communication in different contexts.

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## FURTHER INFORMATION

- ▶ EEF: *Dialogic teaching*, 2017: <https://buff.ly/4kflJfM>
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- ▶ Oracy Education Commission: *We need to talk*, 2024: <https://oracyeducation.commission.co.uk/>
- ▶ Voice 21 & Oracy Cambridge: *The Oracy Framework*, 2015: <https://buff.ly/4gy6A15>

# ... and how do we teach it?

Oracy can be taught in every lesson through carefully planned and thoughtfully structured discussions in pairs, small groups and as a whole class...

It is year 10 computer science – not a lesson where you would typically expect to see oracy take centre stage. Even the layout of the classroom poses a challenge, with banks of computers forming physical barriers between students.

The lesson starts: “I’d like you to look at the tier 2 and 3 words – efficiency, maintainability, constructs, functions. You’re going to discuss that in your small oracy groups.”

Students break into small groups. They are clearly used to talking to each other. There is a low hum as students talk together to decide on the most appropriate definition for each term.

The teacher brings the class back together: “Let’s see what we’ve got then. So ‘efficiency’, who can go with it? Go for it Kaelan. What did your group say?”

Kaelan loves to talk: “Solving a problem with the least amount of steps.”

But the teacher is not satisfied with this definition. He asks whether anyone can develop Kaelan’s idea further.

A short, detailed discussion ensues in which students discuss how they can solve a problem with the least amount of code. The teacher challenges them to develop and extend their thinking and explain their reasoning, providing a solid basis for the learning students will be doing for the rest of the lesson.

The talk does not end there. The teacher quickly reminds students of the conventions of group talk in his classroom: “Remember the rules. Remember you can’t talk over each other. I’m looking at you two in particular! Remember to build on what someone’s saying. Clarify if they are not understanding.” (See further information for Voice 21’s *Discussion Guidelines* and *Talk Tactics* resources.)

The teacher shares two extracts of code: “They’re both lovely programs but they’re not perfect. I

want you to decide what programming techniques have been used. Which program is more efficient and what maintainability techniques have been used as well? Which is the better program?”

The students break off and begin talking in trios. You can hear students applying their subject knowledge to the problem at hand, pulling out features of each program and evaluating each one based on the key concepts explored at the start of the lesson. I am drawn to a group where a lively discussion has broken out.

“Guys, I need your clarification. Why is the function unnecessary?”

Another student responds, pointing to examples in the code to support his explanation.

“So the second is useless is what you’re saying to me,” clarifies the first student. It is clear he has misunderstood and so the second student provides an alternative explanation.

“Ah I get that now,” the first student replies.

After several minutes, the teacher brings the class back together, inviting summarisers to share each group’s reflections on each code. These students are required to make their reasoning public, comparing each program and articulating which one they think is better overall.

This is not a standalone oracy lesson, yet students have learnt both “to” and “through” talk. Through carefully planned and thoughtfully structured

“They have had opportunities to apply, refine, and deepen their understanding of key programming concepts and develop their oracy skills”

## Amy Gaunt

...is director of learning, impact and influence at Voice 21, a national oracy education charity. Amy is co-author of *Transform Teaching & Learning Through Talk*. Find Amy’s previous SecEd contributions via [www.sec-ed.co.uk/authors/amy-gaunt](http://www.sec-ed.co.uk/authors/amy-gaunt) or visit <https://voice21.org/>

discussions – both in small groups and as a whole class – they have had opportunities to apply, refine, and deepen their understanding of key programming concepts and develop their oracy skills.

When you see a lesson like this in action, it is easy to miss the expertise, decisions, and strategies that make it work.

This is why Voice 21 developed the Oracy Benchmarks (2019) – to guide and empower teachers to develop oracy in their classrooms and make the principles behind effective oracy practice accessible for all students.

There are five benchmarks for schools and five for teachers. Let’s explore how the five teacher benchmarks were brought to life in the lesson I describe here.

## Benchmark 1: Sets high expectations for oracy:

The teacher establishes and models ambitious norms for talk, encouraging students to use technical vocabulary and articulate their thinking with precision. High expectations are evident as the teacher challenges students to explain and refine their reasoning. Established routines ensure that students confidently engage in educationally productive discussions.

## Benchmark 2: Values every voice:

Every student is encouraged to participate, first in small groups and then in whole-class discussions, allowing them to refine and develop their ideas before presenting them more publicly. The teacher fosters a collaborative culture, prompting students to develop and challenge each other’s ideas rather than immediately offering his own.

## Benchmark 3: Teaches oracy explicitly:

Oracy is intentionally taught in this lesson. The teacher reinforces the conventions of effective discussion, emphasising turn-taking, building on other people’s contributions, and seeking clarification. He scaffolds talk by modelling discussion strategies and encouraging students to justify their reasoning.

## Benchmark 4: Harnesses oracy to elevate learning:

Oracy is integrated into the lesson as a tool to deepen knowledge and understanding. Via discussion, students critically engage with key ideas, challenge misconceptions, and articulate their reasoning. Structured opportunities for dialogue refine their thinking and help them apply their knowledge.

## Benchmark 5: Appraises progress in oracy:

The teacher actively monitors discussions, listening to students’ language and the quality of their reasoning. He provides immediate feedback, prompting them to clarify points and extend thinking. The final task requires students to articulate their reasoning publicly, offering opportunity to assess subject knowledge and oracy skills.

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## FURTHER INFORMATION

- ▶ Voice 21: *The Oracy Benchmarks*, 2019: <https://voice21.org/oracy-benchmarks>
- ▶ Voice 21: *Discussion Guidelines*: <https://buff.ly/41lqm4a>
- ▶ Voice 21: *Talk Tactics*: <https://buff.ly/4gXF6fn>

# Speak like Socrates: How to build a culture of oracy

Diving into the ‘learning to’ and ‘learning through’ components of oracy education, this article looks at ideas and methods for delivering these in the classroom, including dialogic teaching

What does effective oracy pedagogy look like in a classroom across subjects? Oracy is too often seen as the same as speaking and listening, something Ros Wilson challenges in her 2024 book *Oracy is Not Just Speaking and Listening*. She states that “oracy brings a quality of language, phraseology, passion and performance that everyday speaking and listening does not often achieve and rarely aspires to”. Ultimately, oracy can improve academic outcomes, increase confidence, foster wellbeing, equip students for life beyond school, narrow gaps, and promote social equity (see Voice 21’s Oracy Benchmarks, 2019).

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF, 2017) has found that oral language interventions such as purposeful, curriculum-focused dialogue and interaction can bring about six months’ additional progress across a year. With this in mind, it is important that schools seek to implement an curriculum that prioritises oracy skills. I advocate for a whole-school approach to ensure that teachers understand its importance as the “fourth R” and are given opportunities to translate the research into practice. This should, however, be done as a staged approach rather than asking teachers to implement everything at once.

Oracy in practice

In its report *We need to talk*, the Oracy Education Commission (2024) proposes that oracy is comprised of three components:

- Learning to talk, listen and communicate.
- Learning through talk, listening and communication.
- Learning about talk, listening and communication.

In her article on page 4, Voice



Yamina Bibi

...is an author, consultant, speaker, coach and former deputy headteacher. She is co-founder of South Asian Educators’ Network, a #WomenEd Network Leader, and a fellow of the Chartered College of Teaching. Find Yamina’s previous SecEd contributions via [www.sec-ed.co.uk/authors/yamina-bibi](http://www.sec-ed.co.uk/authors/yamina-bibi)

21’s Amy Gaunt introduces these elements. Here, I would like to explore further strategies for delivering the first two in the classroom. Before I begin, it is important to note that a classroom where oracy is central and effectively used should be a classroom with a culture of high expectations and trust. Without this, students will not feel safe enough to speak-up, share ideas, and have their voices heard.

Learning to...

The first component should be a

whole-school approach where students across the school are explicitly taught the skills to talk, listen and communicate. This ensures a shared language within the school community and attempts to limit inconsistency. As discussed already in this supplement, the Oracy Framework (Voice 21 & Oracy Cambridge, 2015) is particularly helpful as it breaks these skills down into four strands: Physical, cognitive, linguistic, and social/emotional. This could be taught as part of a form time programme with tutors

exploring what each component looks like in practice during and outside of lessons. Teachers could break this down further into talking, listening and communicating – as each would require a different set of skills. For example, for cognitive listening skills, students can be taught about listening to understand rather than to respond. Teachers can help them to practise skills to show that they are listening to understand, such as summarising and asking clarifying questions. A fantastic example comes from Sarah Bonnell School in east London. Leaders of oracy at the school collaborated with students to introduce a “listening ladder”, which described the varying levels of listening students might showcase during a lesson. As we explicitly teach students how to talk, listen and

Question: How might improving literacy across the world help create sustainable and peaceful societies?			
Instigator	Builder	Challenger	Summariser
Starts the discussion	Develops the idea	Presents another idea	Shares the key points
I would like to start by saying...	Building on that idea, I think...	You said... but I think...	The main points were...
I think we should consider...	I agree, I would like to add...	I disagree with you because...	Our discussion focused on...
Has anyone thought about...	Linking to that point, I think...	It could be argued that...	The main ideas raised were...

Figure 1: Adapted from a form-time discussion resource from Sarah Bonnell School, which draws upon Lemov’s Habits of Discussion (2021) and offers sentence stems

Debate: An Inspector Calls is left-wing propaganda and should be removed from the curriculum		
Building on a previous point	Questioning another point	Disagreeing with a previous point
Further to X’s point, I would like to add that...	I would like to pose a question to X following their point...	I believe that X failed to recognise...
To extend X’s point further, I would like to add that...	Could it be argued that... Have you considered that...	I respectfully disagree with X because...
I agree with X when they said that... and would build on that with...	I would like to pose the following question to the class...	

Figure 2: Adapted from an English lesson discussion resource from Forest Gate Community School and incorporating Lemov’s Habits of Discussion (2021)

communicate in our classrooms, it is vital that we hold them accountable, too, so that they understand these skills are important. Classic strategies – such as “think-pair-share” or “turn & talk”, commonly used by many teachers – can be ineffective if the teacher does not ensure that every student has an opportunity to share and to be heard. To limit this and hold students to account, teachers can ask all students to allocate themselves a role within their conversation, such as Speaker A and Speaker B. This helps ensure they take turns to share their ideas during the discussion. When taking feedback, the teacher can then ask the students to share what their talk partner discussed and to explain if they agree or disagree – and why. This ensures a level of accountability of each talk partner while also ensuring that students take the time to process their talk partner’s ideas in order to build on or challenge them.

Habits of Discussion

Habits of Discussion is a technique

shared in Doug Lemov’s *Teach Like a Champion 3.0* (2021) to instil skills such as initiating a discussion and building on and challenging each other’s ideas. Teachers can allocate these as roles for students in small groups to ensure there are no passengers during discussions. Teachers may also provide students with sentence stems to encourage talk within and beyond their allocated role and ensure that students use the stems provided and praise them when used. The two tables above provide examples of how Habits of Discussion and sentence stems can be put into practice. The technique can be used with normal classroom discussion guidelines, such as:

- Face the speaker so they know they have your full attention.
- Speak in full sentences to practise articulating yourself.
- Listen to understand not to just respond.
- Use people’s names to show respect.
- Ask questions to clarify understanding.
- Nod or give words of encouragement.

Learning through...

Student dialogue is at the heart of my pedagogy as it gives me an insight into the ideas students have on the subject matter at hand and enables me to make more effective decisions in my classroom to support learning. In *A Dialogic Teaching Companion* (2020), Robin Alexander states that dialogic teaching uses the “power of talk” to engage interest, stimulate thinking, advance understanding, expand ideas, and build and evaluate arguments. Dialogic teaching methods are evidenced in the EEF’s 2017 research which found that children receiving dialogic teaching made two additional months’ progress in English and science, and one in maths. Dialogic teaching ensures the teacher asks questions which move students away from simply recalling answers and invites them to develop, justify and question their answers. A Socratic seminar is a specific style of dialogic teaching. They can take place in groups of six to eight or can involve the whole class. Students are given a topic, text or question to discuss with the teacher as a facilitator. Each student is allocated a role as part of the discussion group or the observation group. Some students in the observation group are matched to a student in the discussion group whereas others observe oracy skills as outlined in the Oracy Framework. Socratic seminars are effective across the curriculum. For example, in science they can be used to engage students in a debate about the use of stem cells, while in maths a teacher may give one group a problem to solve while others observe and then discuss the methods employed. In some lessons the Socratic discussion may be used as part of a “Do Now” activity to hook learners, while in others it may be part of the main activity to enable students to show their knowledge. To take the question in figure 2 above, Socratic roles might be:

- A: Discuss the question. Use academic language. Focus on critical ideas/interpretation.
- B: Discuss the question. Focus on identifying key quotations. Analyse specific words/phrases.
- C: Discuss the question. Focus on the writer’s ideas, message, viewpoint, and purpose.
- D: Observe student A and make notes on what they say (what went well and even better if).
- E: Ditto for student B.
- F: Ditto for student C.
- G: Use the Oracy Framework and identify examples of the four strands in action.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- ▶ Alexander: *A Dialogic Teaching Companion*, Routledge, 2020.
- ▶ Beck, McKeown & Kucan: *Bringing Words to Life: Robust vocabulary instruction*, Guildford Press, 2013.
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- ▶ Oracy Education Commission: *We need to talk*, 2024: <https://oracyeducation.commission.co.uk/>
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- ▶ Voice 21 & Oracy Cambridge: *The Oracy Framework*, 2015: <https://buff.ly/4gY6Al5>

Vocabulary instruction

A key part of effective oracy practice is equipping students with the specific tier 2 and 3 vocabulary needed for them to express ideas in a sophisticated manner. Through explicit vocabulary instruction, using examples shared in *Bringing Words to Life* (Beck et al, 2013) and *Closing the Vocabulary Gap* (Quigley, 2018), we can identify key words for students to use to articulate their ideas, and through choral rehearsal we can teach meaning and pronunciation. Students should be exposed to multiple examples and non-examples of the words being used in sentences. Teachers may then use strategies such as the Habits of Discussion or dialogic teaching methods (see EEF, 2017 for some ideas) to provide students with opportunities to practise using these in class discussions and thus build confidence.



# Why you need subject expertise to teach talk

Each subject has its own unique language and ways of communicating – which makes disciplinary literacy a crucial part of oracy education...

**D**isciplinary oracy is the recognition that what it means to communicate effectively varies between disciplines (Moorghen, 2023).

The oracy skills we use, teach and value in the science classroom differ to those used, taught and valued in the history classroom. We cannot impose uniform expectations on the way students talk (explain, reason...) and expect that this will be educationally productive in every lesson, regardless of subject matter.

These differences arise because “each subject has its own unique language, ways of knowing, doing, and communicating” (Quigley & Coleman, 2019). This is at its most apparent when it comes to the oracy we use and teach.

There is a tight relationship between talking and thinking. Through spoken language, we develop cognitively, we access new ideas, (disciplinary) modes of analysis, and conceptual understanding.

The best oracy practitioners are those who mobilise their subject expertise – they understand the reasoning and thinking that students need to do to grapple with their subject, and use this to plan for the speaking and listening that students will need to do in order to extend and expose this thinking.

As such, the most meaningful oracy activities in the classroom are those that help students to access the thinking of the discipline: to talk, and therefore to think, like a specialist.

## Amanda Moorghen

*...is head of learning, impact and policy at Voice 21. She supports the charity's whole-school approach to oracy education, which now reaches more than 1,000 schools. Visit <https://voice21.org/>*

### In support of learning

We know that learning through talk promotes student attainment across subjects (EEF, 2017). We also know that the type and quality of classroom talk matters.

We are listening for classrooms where students explain and elaborate their reasoning, where their ideas are listened to and built on or challenged by peers, and where students are in discussion with one another – not engaging in a series of individual student-teacher interactions.

These rich discussions about curricular content – perhaps evaluating sources in history or solving a tricky problem in maths – deepen students' knowledge, as they develop and practise using subject-specific reasoning skills and engage with new concepts.

Further, these pedagogies extend teachers' insight into student thinking and learning, enabling them to address misconceptions and ensure they are building on secure foundational understanding.

### Confident, active learners

Disciplinary oracy is inextricably linked with students' sense of confidence and agency over their academic performance. It makes explicit, through talk, the logics of the discipline.

As a result, students are better

able to evaluate their own performance, and less reliant on external validation (Simon-Caffyn et al, 2025). They are more able to work through challenge independently of the teacher, whether this involves drawing on the resources of a group of peers or having internalised metacognitive and problem-solving talk that strengthens their ability to “think something through”.

### Equitable classrooms

For learning through talk to benefit all students, everyone has to be taught how to join in, especially on arrival in secondary school.

For some, anxiety around speaking spikes upon entry to secondary school. To address this, and ensure that every student can participate in discussions, or present on their learning, in every subject, every teacher (not just the English department or form tutors) must set clear expectations for classroom talk and support students to meet these.

Some expectations will be held in common across the school, some will be subject-specific. For example, teachers will draw on their understanding of oracy and their subject expertise to use narration, questioning and praise to help students develop their ability to engage in rich discussion that extends their subject-specific thinking.

These clear expectations, structures and scaffolds for talk (where needed) create more inclusive, thoughtful classrooms by disproportionately benefiting those who otherwise find it hardest to take part.



## FURTHER INFORMATION

- ▶ EEF: Dialogic teaching, 2017: <https://buff.ly/4kFLJfM>
- ▶ Moorghen: Is every teacher a teacher of oracy? English: Journal of the English Association (72), 2023.
- ▶ Quigley & Coleman: Improving literacy in secondary schools: Guidance report, EEF, 2019.
- ▶ Simon-Caffyn et al: Confidence and Outcomes for Students and Teachers. In Oracy: The Politics of Speech Education, Wright (ed), Cambridge University Press, 2025.
- ▶ Snell & Cushing: 'A lot of them write how they speak': Policy, pedagogy and the policing of 'nonstandard' English, Literacy (56,3), 2022.

### Linguistic repertoires

Within the classroom, correcting students' use of language can hinder learning through talk (Snell & Cushing, 2022). However, classroom talk is not a free-for-all, where we offer no guidance or feedback on contributions.

Disciplinary oracy helps us make sense of this. It offers a purpose – to induct students into the ways of talking (and thinking) of the discipline. For example, in a science classroom, using technical vocabulary accurately is important – and to pretend otherwise is to do students a disservice. On the other hand, to “speak like a scientist” doesn't require that students speak “standard” English, or even in full sentences!

### Final thoughts

I leave you with some questions that you will want to discuss:

- What should talk sound like in your subject area?
- What contexts for subject-specific talk might your students encounter when they leave school?
- What kinds of thinking and reasoning do you want to see in your students' writing and hear in their discussions?
- Are there attitudes or values that you might instil through talk (e.g. a willingness to balance two opposing stances in history; an openness to sharing uncertain thinking in maths)?

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# Using subject-focused talk

Six practical approaches for your classroom to build students' confidence in using subject vocabulary

**T**hrough subject-focused talk, students learn discipline-specific ways of thinking and knowing,

acquire distinctive uses of vocabulary or expression, and engage in differing types of dialogue and interactions, such as:

- Explaining and interpreting historical events.
- How to make sense of scientific evidence and test out theories.
- Exploring mathematical concepts/interpreting data.
- Evaluating and understanding works of art.
- Discussing ethical and moral dilemmas in RE.

Creating opportunities for structured talk provides students with a bridge between their “everyday” ways of making sense of the world, and the deeper, fuller understanding required for academic success.

When students discuss ideas and explain their thinking, classrooms become communities of voices in which ideas can be explored, adjusted, revised, and extended. This develops important oracy skills, such as explaining an idea clearly, engaging in a productive discussion, or giving reasons to support a viewpoint.

Through planned, structured opportunities for talk, students develop the ability to reason, analyse and evaluate as “experts”, talking as scientists, sports coaches, designers and so on, developing greater precision and complexity in knowledge and expression. Here are six approaches.

### 1, Classroom dialogue

Develop whole-class dialogue about subject content and understanding and use of appropriate terminology via “dialogic talk moves”.

Based on the work of Christine

O'Connor and Sarah Michaels, talk moves enable you to model examples of explanations, descriptions, questions and prompt students to do the same.

You can make deliberate use of a “talk move” in a question and answer session. In typical exchanges there are three “turns”: 1. Teacher **initiates** (often with a question). 2. Student/s **respond**. 3. Teacher **evaluates (feedback)**.

But what if we had a repertoire of responses for the third turn to open-up students' thinking? This is at the heart of what characterises disciplinary oracy – promoting deeper thinking while enabling students to explain their ideas. Third turn approaches include:

- **Say more:** Can you say more..? What do you mean by..?
- **Evidence/reasoning:** Why do you think that? Can you explain your thinking? How did you arrive at that conclusion?
- **Challenge:** Does it always work that way? How does that fit with what X said? What if..?
- **Add:** Who can add to that? Who can build on what X just said?

### 2, Talking points

Talking points are thought-provoking statements designed to engage students in extended exploratory discussion. Students are invited to give an initial response (agree-disagree-not sure; always-sometimes-never true) then discuss with each other to explore reasons and evidence to support their views.

These are ideal opportunities to seed subject terminology into the discussion. An effective way to do this is by displaying sentence starters or core subject vocabulary for students to refer to and use.

The type of talk used at first is likely to be informal and exploratory, so follow up in a

plenary (talk moves) to build-up collective understanding through dialogue.

### 3, Provide models

Watching, hearing, analysing and evaluating how someone else uses talk in a specific context is a powerful means of learning.

- Model how to discuss ideas in an exploratory way.
- Draw attention to how – as the subject expert – you structure an explanation (using props/notes to convey a complex idea or using evidence to make a persuasive case).
- Show TedTalks – they are a model for how to structure a presentation with confidence and useful for practising focused listening and extracting key points.
- Invite a visiting expert with a planned Q&A discussion and analyse later how the speaker used subject language.

### 4, Authentic contexts

Create purposes and audiences that require/motivate students to use more formal, “public” registers in presenting information and responding to questions. Examples might include “exhibitions” where students stand in front of their work ready to explain it to others, or two-minute TED-style talks in which students explain their views on a subject-related issue. These are opportunities to teach specific oracy skills, such as selecting relevant content, adapting style and content for different audiences, and using voice and gesture to ensure clarity of delivery and to engage listeners.

### 5, Expert roles

Use specific strategies that require students to adopt “expert” roles, linked to specific subject content:

- **Pairs to fours:** Initial exploratory discussion in pairs who then join another pair to “explain your thinking and ask each other questions”.
- **Envoys:** Groups work collaboratively to discuss an idea/problem, then send a member off to another group to summarise their thinking, take questions, and bring back new ideas.
- **Jigsaw:** Students start off in small groups. A topic is divided into four parts/questions and divided between individuals.

## Alan Howe

*...is an associate at Oracy Cambridge and a Bye-Fellow of Hughes Hall, University of Cambridge. Visit <https://oracycambridge.org/>*

Each then joins others in an “expert” group, all of whom have been allocated the same topic or question. These groups work collaboratively to find information. Eventually, the “experts” return to their home group to explain what they have learnt.

- **Hot-seating:** Students take on the role of an expert and are closely questioned by others.

### 6, Oracy objectives

For lesson sequences where “talking as a subject expert” is an explicit aim, consider writing specific oracy learning objectives. For example:

- Clearly explain your reasoning by drawing on evidence.
- Present a clear account of an event or process.
- Explain and interpret events based on multiple sources.
- Use appropriate terminology to summarise a process.
- Persuade others of a course of action based on evidence.
- Present a proof by showing and explaining your working.
- Build on an idea that someone else is developing.
- Explain what someone else means using subject terms.

This is an opportunity to focus students' attention on how to use talk to carry out a task that is directly associated with subject learning, and to reflect on how well they achieved it.

Drawing up a map of these subject-focused oracy skills across the curriculum will ensure that students experience a wide range of different types of talking and listening.

### Final thoughts

These six approaches cultivate attentive, evaluative listening as well as a growing command of a range of speech styles. Students are supported in making appropriate choices in how to speak and listen according to the situation, while also using their “everyday” language to grapple with new learning.

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*We are listening for classrooms where students explain and elaborate their reasoning and where students are in discussion with one another*

# Fostering oracy skills in year 7

Speaking up in the classroom can be daunting for students, especially those who have just arrived in secondary school in year 7. How can we support these young speakers?

As we have discovered so far in this supplement, a focus on oracy can support learning in any subject and it is important to start building these skills as soon as students arrive in year 7.

- This article considers practical ways of introducing three ideas:
- Speaking and listening are ways into thinking and learning.
  - Working with others helps everyone to do better.
  - Asking questions is the way forward.

### Thinking and learning

It is useful for you to know who is confident to speak, who is reluctant, who can listen attentively, and who is not keen to have their voice heard.

The most effective way to find out is to have the students tell you what they think. They will certainly have their own ideas about how things went in primary school.

Ask your year 7s to talk to one another for five minutes about some of the following statements:

- There is no point giving answers aloud in class.
- It is difficult to speak in class.
- Working with other people helps me learn more.
- It is easier to read information or instructions than to listen to them.
- Attentive listening is what helps understanding.
- Working in a group is a waste of time.
- I like it when the teacher asks me a question.
- Some people speak up in class, others don't. Nothing can change that.
- I like it when it's quiet.

Ask the students to note what their partner says. Ask them to say whether they agree or disagree with these ideas and why. Ask them to encourage each other to talk, giving reasons and explanations.

Then collect ideas from around the class. Think aloud with them

about speaking and listening, relating it to thinking and learning.

Discuss ideas about classroom talk and say what you want to happen in your classroom. Ask what barriers they have experienced in the past and what we can do about them.

You might also give year 7 students a diagram with four words (speak, listen, think, learn) set at corners of a square. Ask the students to write words or phrases along the lines to explain how talk can help learning – or how it can be a barrier.

### Working with others

It is helpful to remind year 7s that their education is meant to help everyone learn and that it isn't a competition – everyone takes different paths and moves at their own pace.

Show how this works by asking the class to read, listen and generally find out about a new, specific topic in your curriculum area, with no input from you (decide if you want them to work with a partner on this).

Make it clear that the focus is on using talk to share relevant information. Ask partners to talk together to share three things each that they have found out.

Next ask one pair to share aloud one of their facts or ideas. They then nominate another pair. Keep going until everyone feels that they have shared all helpful information. Does the class feel they have learned from one another?

Point out any useful new vocabulary, clear descriptions, and things that are complex and that might need more work. Remind the class that information shared is doubled and that they have supported one another's learning.

Dr Lyn Dawes

...is an associate working with Oracy Cambridge and a former teacher of science. Visit <https://oracycambridge.org/> and find Lyn's previous SecEd contributions via [www.sec-ed.co.uk/authors/dr-lyn-dawes](http://www.sec-ed.co.uk/authors/dr-lyn-dawes)

### Asking questions

To say what you don't know can be difficult. Questions may seem too simple or trivial. But as Ramon Beautista said: "The only stupid question is the question that is never asked."

One student's question can bring answers for many. Questions lead to learning. Saying that you are unsure means that you know you have something to learn – which is a good thing.

Answering questions sometimes requires extraordinary patience. For some questions, you can turn over the task of answering to the class, or ask everyone to come along next lesson with an answer.

Give yourself thinking time with the common response: "That's a good question..."

Start a lesson (on any topic) with the oracy focus on asking questions. Stop the lesson at key points and ask pairs to write down two questions – one they know the answer to and one that they don't.

Offer appropriate question starters for this task – who, when, where, why. Make it clear if you would like questions to include subject-specific vocabulary. Then ask students to share their questions and answers.

Ask students to think of one question about your session to bring along to the next lesson.

### Oracy in action

Thinking about oracy skills generally, if you were to do just one thing to enhance your

students' learning, I would suggest that you choose a clear oracy focus for your year 7 lessons, and explain what it is at the start of each lesson:

- This lesson I think we need some questions.
- This is complicated so please listen attentively and think about what you hear.
- We'd like to hear you say what you think.
- I need to know what you don't understand/would like to learn more about.
- This time we can use our new vocabulary.
- This classroom is a place where you can speak up.
- And then during or at the end of the lesson, take a minute (not a moment, a whole minute) to reflect back on students' achievement based on your chosen oracy focus for the lesson:
  - That question shows that you understand well enough to go a bit further.
  - Your question shows insight.
  - That's interesting, I'd like to hear several answers to your question.
  - You show you understand so I can tell that you listened carefully.
  - You've remembered key details – you must have listened well.
  - You put that clearly.
  - Your explanation is helpful.
  - I liked your choice of vocabulary.
  - Your description brings it to life.
  - A good discussion. Thank you all.
  - I've learnt something today.
  - Then whet their appetites: "Next time our oracy focus will be on..."

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☞ Stop the lesson at key points and ask pairs to write down two questions – one they do know the answer to and one that they don't ☞

# Oracy, vocabulary and year 7 transition

A Voice 21 project to harness oracy skills to support vocabulary development during the year 6 to 7 transition yielded five lessons...

Placing oracy at the heart of vocabulary teaching and learning accelerates progress in reading, builds students' confidence to use their voices in school, and enhances teachers' understanding and delivery of oracy education.

These were the principle findings of Voicing Vocabulary – a project designed to explore the opportunities an oracy-rich approach creates to build and deepen students' academic vocabulary at the crucial key stage 2 to 3 transition point.

Several disruptive factors coincide at this age affecting perceptions of self and academic attainment (Jindal-Snape et al, 2020). There is a notable linguistic challenge that many students experience as they move into year 7. To an extent, this is connected to an increase in both the quantity and complexity of disciplinary language across the curriculum (Deignan et al, 2022).

Through the project, we wanted to explore if oracy education could address this challenge by creating frequent and purposeful opportunities for students to encounter, experiment with, and showcase newly learned language through talk. In doing so, we identified five active ingredients of an oracy-centred approach to vocabulary development.

### 1, Shared understanding

A shared understanding of oracy supports teachers and students to value the role of talk in learning processes, demystifying what constitutes effective classroom talk. Teachers can familiarise themselves with the Oracy Framework (Voice 21 & Oracy Cambridge, 2015) and the Oracy Benchmarks (Voice 21, 2019), which were introduced by my colleague Amy Gaunt earlier in this supplement (pages 4-5).

Kathleen McBride

...is senior learning and innovation lead at Voice 21. Visit <https://voice21.org/>

### 2, Prioritise vocabulary

In a busy curriculum, knowing which words to teach explicitly is key. Selecting words to prioritise across the curriculum is difficult to do in isolation and may well change year-to-year. By placing vocabulary at the heart of planning processes, schools can instigate more discussion around which words to teach and when, helping teachers to make judicious choices about language.

- In the Voicing Vocabulary project, participants found that:
- Teaching fewer words in more depth leads to better retention and more accurate application of new language.
  - A vocabulary-first approach ensures that thinking about key words doesn't become an add-on and instead sits at the heart of topic or unit planning.
  - Collaborating with subject colleagues and across departments to prioritise vocabulary creates better curriculum cohesion and more opportunities for students to encounter academic language in a range of contexts.

### 3, Context is key

Contextualise new vocabulary through talk. The progression from vocabulary input (hearing or seeing new language) to output (producing new language) is a process that takes time as new words are gradually embedded into students' productive vocabulary (Beck et al, 2013).

Including multiple "low-stakes" activities during the input phase creates engaging opportunities for

learning and builds confidence and retention of new language. Teachers on the project:

- Created more space for exploratory talk as opposed to presentational talk (Barnes, 1976) and built students' confidence to express their early thinking by creating a positive culture of talk in the classroom.
- Used scaffolds (discussion guidelines, sentence starters, groupings, discussion roles) where appropriate to support experimentation with new vocabulary.

### 4, Foster mastery

Use oracy to monitor ownership of new vocabulary. Talk is also an effective vehicle for assessing students' mastery of vocabulary.

Once familiarity with new language has been established (through input activities) teachers can create meaningful oracy-centred contexts for language production. Grounding these activities in talk allows students to demonstrate their ownership of new vocabulary and enables teachers to judge how effectively this vocabulary has been learned. Teachers can do this by:

- Selecting meaningful contexts for the application of new language that situate subject-specific vocabulary in authentic disciplinary scenarios – i.e. giving an expert talk in science, demonstrating a proof in maths, or delivering a weather report in French.
- Teaching the oracy skills required for more presentational oracy experiences and equipping students to engage in different modes of classroom talk.

### 5, Collaborate cross-phase

In the project schools, opportunities for teachers to work



### FURTHER INFORMATION

- ▶ Barnes: *From communication to curriculum*, Penguin Education, 1976.
- ▶ Beck, McKeown & Kucan: *Bringing Words to Life: Robust vocabulary instruction*, Guilford Press, 2013.
- ▶ Deignan, Candarli & Oxley: *The Linguistic Challenge of the Transition to Secondary School*, Routledge, 2022.
- ▶ Jindal-Snape et al: *Systematic literature review of primary-secondary transitions: International research*, Review of Education (8), BERA, 2020.
- ▶ Voice 21: *The Oracy Benchmarks*, 2019: <https://voice21.org/oracy-benchmarks>
- ▶ Voice 21: *Voicing Vocabulary: Establishing and evaluating an oracy-centred approach to vocabulary development*, 2023: <https://buff.ly/3DaxKH4>
- ▶ Voice 21 & Oracy Cambridge: *The Oracy Framework*, 2015: <https://buff.ly/4gY6Al5>

with their cross-phase colleagues enhanced teacher practice in both primary and secondary settings. We encourage schools to:

- Establish connections between subject leads in primary and teachers in secondary to identify the vocabulary students have been introduced to at key stage 2 and will need to master at key stage 3 – particularly helpful in subjects where there is a dramatic increase in the volume and intricacy of new vocabulary.
- Identify where existing transition activities could be enhanced by an oracy-rich approach and where students might encounter some of the cross-curricular vocabulary they will need to access the key stage 3 curriculum.

### Final thoughts

Four years since we launched Voicing Vocabulary, we continue to see the impact of an oracy-centred approach to vocabulary teaching in Voice 21 Oracy Schools. You can read more about the project and see the recommendations in action in the *Voicing Vocabulary* report (Voice 21, 2023).

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# Vocabulary is a good place to start

Vocabulary development is a crucial part of oracy education, but what can we do to promote vocabulary learning in secondary schools?

**V**ocabulary knowledge is the building block for all aspects of language (and literacy).

It refers to knowledge about words that is stored in memory, including what words sound like (phonology), what they mean (semantics) and, once you can read and write, what they look like (orthography). Building this knowledge involves:

- **Increasing breadth:** By learning new words.
- **Increasing depth:** By adding to knowledge of known words (e.g. other meanings/sense).
- **Increasing diversity:** By learning different kinds of words (e.g. parts of speech, everyday tier 1 words, topic-specific tier 3 words).

In our longitudinal research we have found that vocabulary knowledge is extremely variable and that there are high levels of vocabulary need in secondary students (Ricketts et al, 2020; van der Kleij et al, 2023). And yet, all must access roughly the same curriculum and engage with oracy and literacy activities. So what can we do to promote vocabulary learning?

Well, lots of things – but we have shown that showing students what words look like helps them to learn what they sound like and what they mean (Ricketts et al, 2021).

The bottom line is that we cannot assume that all students have the vocabulary that they need to engage with oracy (and literacy). (For an accessible public report of the research cited above, see Shapiro et al, 2023.)

## What can we do?

Many schools have put vocabulary learning at the heart of their literacy development programmes. Students having the words to think, understand and express themselves is a key requisite for being effective

### Lucy Floyer & Jessie Ricketts

...Lucy is a teacher, educational advisor, trainer and coach. Visit <https://lucyfloyer.wixsite.com/education>

...Jessie is a professor of psychology at Royal Holloway, University of London. Visit <https://lara.psychologyresearch.co.uk>

communicators, and we know that the huge range in students' vocabulary knowledge can be both an asset and a challenge for teachers. A good oracy development programme will ensure that students have the vocabulary they need to talk and listen confidently, whether that is through activating prior vocabulary knowledge and introducing new target vocabulary, or by sharing a whole-school language for learning to, through and about talk.

## Talk and vocabulary

Students are often introduced to new vocabulary through talk. Verbal explanations can enhance students' understanding of the meaning of words, alongside written definitions.

It is helpful to hear the word used in speech and the correct pronunciation – using talk to explore and revisit vocabulary.

Explanations of etymology, links to words or parts of words they already know, also help retain new vocabulary by connecting it explicitly to prior learning.

More extended exploration of new vocabulary can be supported by peer talk, for example exploring examples/non-examples, explaining, clarifying and practising vocabulary in use. Peers and teachers can model using vocabulary correctly and accurately, and questioning can help enhance understanding as well as expose misconceptions and malapropisms.

## A consistent approach

Having a whole school

terminology for oracy activities and behaviours is a good idea. One of the challenges of developing oracy, including vocabulary development, is that talk does require time – time for thinking and planning and time to practise, for both teachers and students.

A whole-school approach can effectively promote vocabulary learning while preserving teacher time. This might include:

**Common activities:** The adoption of shared names for a toolkit of routine classroom oracy activities. For example, students talking with a partner might be known as “talking partners”, “turn & talk”, or “think-pair-share”. Agreeing a set of standard oracy activities, naming them, and training teachers and students in using them provides a useful scaffold for focusing on learning content.

**Common methods:** Creating a shared method of delivering extended or curriculum oracy activities such as presentational or exploratory talk is also helpful. Identifying these key types of extended talk and sharing a teaching method, resources, and expected behaviours for them supports teachers' confidence and skill in delivering the curriculum through oracy activities and cuts down on planning time. For example, an extended exploratory talk episode can be supported by:

- A shared teacher script for introducing the activity.
- Advice on grouping students for extended talk.
- Expected speaking and listening behaviours.

- Sentence stems for expressing and structuring types of thoughts such as challenging or building on an argument or justifying an opinion.

This allows teachers to devote curriculum planning time to the subject content and vocabulary; and lesson planning time to tailoring the activity and content to the specific needs of their students.

Having shared frameworks for extended oracy supports teachers' ability to scaffold students' exposure to talk for a range of purposes and audiences. Repeated exposure to the language of expressing thoughts and responding to ideas helps cement them in students' memories.

**Common success criteria:** Oracy may not be formally assessed, but the clarity and consistency of sharing these criteria across different lessons, subjects and teachers helps students to develop their oracy skills in a range of contexts, even when the content differs. The additional benefit for students of being aware of the criteria and able to evaluate themselves against it also helps them to take ownership of their own learning and supports the transferability of skills that many students find difficult. Learning the vocabulary of criteria such as register, tone or gesture supports students in their ability to utilise these aspects of talk. **SecEd**



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- Shapiro et al: *Reading and vocabulary, Aston University & Royal Holloway, 2023: <https://buff.ly/4bmh5xh>*
- van der Kleij et al: *Tracking vocabulary and reading growth in children from lower and higher socioeconomic backgrounds during the transition from primary to secondary education, Child Development*, 2023.

# A Voice Toolkit: Supporting staff

Halifax Academy recognised the importance of supporting staff to plan for and deliver oracy across the curriculum, leading to a comprehensive CPD programme, including its Voice Toolkit...

**H**alifax Academy serves a community with high deprivation and where many families speak English as an additional language.

We began working with Voice 21 as a partner school in 2019 to build a whole-school culture which values and celebrates students' voices. Like Voice 21, we believe that oracy is more than just speaking well – it is about teaching students to listen, reflect, and engage with the world around them. Our school mission – “A Voice to Change the World” – captures our commitment to supporting every student to believe their voice matters.

Our Voice Curriculum is about building confidence and a strong sense of identity. We know that when students learn to articulate their thoughts, to listen and respond to others, and to speak with authority, they begin to see themselves differently.

We aim to give our students a platform, a sense of ownership over their ideas, and the ability to navigate spaces from which they might otherwise feel excluded.

In 2021, we were accredited as a Voice 21 Centre of Oracy Excellence. When we heard our students talking to the panel, we knew that our initial vision was being realised. Student comments included:

- “I’m not just using my voice for education, but for society. Our school helps us to work collectively and to be confident when we meet new people.”
- “If you’ve got an accent that’s just how you speak, what matters is how you use your words.”

## Supporting staff

So, what have we done to make our vision a reality? We read and researched, attended and shared training and committed to creating

a bank of resources that would bring our ideas to life in the classroom – our Voice Toolkit.

Particularly post-pandemic, the Voice Toolkit was a catalyst for getting students talking again. Our toolkit is inspired by Amy Gaunt and Alice Stott's 2018 book: *Transform Teaching and Learning Through Talk: The oracy imperative*.

All colleagues have copies of the toolkit both as a digital slide deck to incorporate into PowerPoints, and as a booklet to prompt coaching conversations and planning.

It includes templates to structure and scaffold classroom talk, such as sentence stems, a summary bullseye, odd one out activities, “would you rather” activities,

content of the Listening Ladders are age-appropriate. Our art department worked their magic on the resources so that the designs tie-in with our school murals and artwork, and some of the content has been reproduced large-scale on classroom walls and displays.

Every classroom in school has a Listening Ladder and sentence stems are in secondary student planners and on all primary classroom walls.

If you ever visit us, you will be greeted by our Voice to Change the World neon sign and artwork throughout the school that speaks of our values of “taking part and joining in” and “speaking up and using my voice for good”.

“We now have an online space for sharing adaptations to the core Voice Toolkit resources and we regularly take time to share tips and talk about best practice”

barrier games, concept cartoons, gallery walks, as well as key CPD resources and summaries of training.

Once we realised the impact that the Voice Toolkit was having on colleagues' conversations and classroom practice, we refined and developed our approach.

We now have an online space for sharing adaptations to the core Voice Toolkit resources and we regularly take time to share tips and talk about best practice.

The toolkit is used across both primary and secondary phases of our all-through 4 to 16 school, and we have adjusted the content so that it reflects our Oracy Progression Map.

For example, sentence stems build from EYFS to year 11 and the

“Voice” also sits at the heart of our school improvement plan. We have dedicated leadership for oracy and make space for it on all agendas.

Through CPD, our Voice Working Group, and coaching sessions, the Voice Toolkit is a resource that is used and adapted by all faculties and phases in school. This has led to, for example:

- **Voice character sessions:** Tutor time talk tasks about issues such as body image, bullying, fake news and gangs.
- **Big Learning Lessons and Talk Assemblies:** These take place for all year groups in school and sessions are often planned to grapple with “big questions”.
- **Harkness Discussions:** Harkness is a student-centred,

### Dani Burns

...is assistant headteacher at Halifax Academy, an all-through (4 to 16) comprehensive school in Calderdale, West Yorkshire

roundtable discussion method designed to promote equal participation, deep inquiry, and collaborative critical thinking. These are led by our senior lead practitioners and enable us to hear students' views.

● **Weekly collaborative planning:** Teachers work together to bring talk tasks to life within curriculum planning. This year, based on observations and feedback, we have also introduced our Confidence Curriculum into the primary phase – this includes drama-led, collaborative learning sessions planned to boost students' literacy, oracy and understanding of self-talk.

We also adapted our transition project to better explore our school values and introduce voice to those joining us from other feeder primary schools. We have rewritten our year 7 English scheme as well so that upon joining us, all students take part in a poetry project that explores identity and voice, as well as adapting schemes across a range of subjects to include oracy outcomes.

## Final thoughts

This has been a whistlestop tour, but we know that our work on oracy will never be done, and the toolkit is not a resource that will ever be “finished” – it evolves every day. It is a deliberately iterative process, owned by all colleagues across school.

We will continue to learn from others and refine what we do, while maintaining a commitment to ensuring that all our students have A Voice to Change the World. **SecEd**



### FURTHER INFORMATION

- Gaunt & Stott: *Transform Teaching and Learning through Talk: The oracy imperative*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2018.

# How can we assess oracy?

Should we be assessing the oracy progress our students make? If so, what exactly are we assessing? And when? And how should we go about doing that?

For most teachers, there is a routine and a set of expectations around the testing of students' literacy and numeracy – but there are a lot of unresolved questions when it comes to oracy assessment. At the heart of this are three challenges.

**Reliability:** A reliable assessment is one that consistently delivers the same result, regardless of who marks it. It is important for fairness, and for our ability to trust in an assessment and use it to make decisions.

Oracy assessments, like essays and other “long answer” questions, tend to be open, with many possible “right” answers (compared to multiple-choice questions, for example).

These sorts of assessments tend to have lower reliability scores, and this is particularly important if the assessment is finely graded and/or to be used in a high-stakes context

**Validity:** What are we assessing exactly? Validity is the extent to which an assessment lets you draw sensible conclusions or make decisions about the thing you think you're measuring. For example, a Monday morning spelling test is a great test of whether children know the words they took home on Friday! It is a worse test of how many words the children know how to spell, in general; and even worse if used as the only test of a child's literacy – it leaves so many other aspects of literacy untested.

In the context of oracy, then, validity poses a challenge. There's a wide range of competencies and contexts that are relevant to our judgement of a student's oracy skills. A student who thrives in a small group discussion might not thrive on stage in front of a large audience. We need to choose our assessments carefully and draw conclusions cautiously.

**Usability:** Assessments have to



work in the real world. Real students need to take the test, administered by real teachers, in real schools.

For oracy, this can present a challenge, whether that is finding a quiet space in a busy school, working out how to fairly assess a group task, or how to record and store students' responses.

## Overcoming challenges

In a way, the absence of top-down, national testing for oracy presents teachers with an opportunity. Each school can determine for themselves whether they need to assess students' oracy, and if so, which dimensions they choose to prioritise and when.

The purpose of these assessments is a formative one. School-based oracy assessments are seeking to understand students' strengths and weaknesses with a view to informing teaching and learning and sharing information across the staff body.

As a result, these assessments ought to be designed to inform teachers' professional judgement – not to replace it. The reliability of the assessment will depend upon the extent to which you have established a shared language for discussing oracy and “what good sounds like” in your school.

## Design your own

In designing your own oracy assessment, you will need to consider the following four things:

**The assessment object:** What are you measuring? The more specific you can be about the aspect of oracy you are trying to assess, the easier it will be. For example, are you more interested in exploratory or presentational modes? Are there specific elements you want to focus on in this assessment? Are there groupings or protocols that are common across subject areas in your school?

**The assessment task:** What task would you like to assess? You will need to find a task that lets students demonstrate the competencies you identified as important to assess – which is also something that it is practical for you to assess in your context. Often, we default to significant one-off events (e.g. a big presentation), but it can be easier and more useful to assess students' everyday talk (e.g. trio discussions).

**Success criteria:** What does it look like to do this task well? Use a blend of description and modelling when discussing this with students and other teachers,

## Amanda Moorghen

...is head of learning, impact and policy at Voice 21. Visit <https://voice21.org/>

to ensure everyone has a shared understanding. There are some aspects of oracy that are very easy to describe (e.g. the pace and volume of the speaker), and others that are more challenging (e.g. most of the cognitive strand).

As a result, it can be easy to fall into a trap, when assessing, of over-focusing on these easier-to-describe areas. To avoid this, make as much use of video as you can – short clips filmed on a tablet can go a long way to enriching teachers' shared understanding of oracy.

**Reporting:** Keep it simple! This may be as light-touch as verbal feedback to students, or notes kept by and for one teacher. You may choose to RAG-rate students or whole classes against the oracy features that you are looking out for. On the other end of the spectrum, you may choose (hopefully infrequently) to film students performing their oracy task, allowing for any outcomes to be moderated and/or stored as evidence of learning.

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# Building an effective oracy assessment framework

Gamechanger skills in citizenship and RE at Priory School include oracy and communication – but how does the school go about assessing student progress?

Students need the skills to articulate their thoughts, engage in meaningful dialogue, and navigate challenging conversations. This is particularly crucial in subjects like citizenship and RE, where we grapple with fundamental questions about identity, belief, and our role in society.

When we initially considered oracy assessment in citizenship and RE, we knew that through structured discussion, deliberation and debate, students don't just learn about democracy – they practise it; they don't simply study different belief systems – they engage in meaningful dialogue about them. These subjects naturally lend themselves to developing what we, as a trust, term Gamechanger Skills – communication, leadership, resilience.

Our journey began with a simple observation: while we were creating opportunities for student voice in our subjects, we weren't systematically assessing or tracking how well they were developing these skills. Students could eloquently express their views, lead group discussions, and demonstrate resilience in defending their positions, but these skills weren't being captured.

The Oracy Framework from Voice 21 and Oracy Cambridge (2015) offered us a foundation for developing an assessment matrix that could capture not just what students know, but how effectively they can communicate it, how well they can lead discussions, and how resilient they are when their views are challenged.

## The assessment matrix

We identified four essential domains of oracy that would enable students to engage meaningfully with complex social, moral, and political issues. These

form the foundation of our assessment approach and grow in sophistication as students progress. They are:

- **Social and emotional:** Focused on turn-taking behaviours – students are assessed on their ability to wait for others to finish, avoid dominating conversations, and show active listening.
- **Linguistic:** Evaluating use of disciplinary/tier 3 vocabulary and appropriate terminology for the subject matter.
- **Cognitive:** Assessing students' ability to provide reasoned arguments, support views with evidence, engage critically with and build on other people's ideas, and structure and organise their thoughts.
- **Applied knowledge:** How effectively students connect learning to current events, demonstrate understanding, and make meaningful links between concepts.

For example, in year 7's Gamechanger unit, students begin developing basic turn-taking and active listening skills while using subject-specific vocabulary.

In year 8's Media Literacy unit, students then apply their listening skills to critically evaluate media sources, while their vocabulary extends to more complex analytical terms.

In year 9 and beyond, students must construct well-reasoned arguments, respond thoughtfully to opposing viewpoints, and make meaningful connections between their learning and current events.

Our assessment matrix (see further information) reflects this progression, with clear descriptors that raise expectations each year.

## In practice

Before introducing explicit teaching of oracy and assessment we did extensive work with our subject leads for citizenship and

## Helen Blachford

...is director for personal development at Bohunt Education Trust and curriculum leader for citizenship and PSHE at Priory School, Southsea

RE across the trust. We dedicated time to consider what oracy means, what we wanted oracy to look like in our curriculum, the oracy skills we wanted to assess, and allowed time to raise concerns and discuss solutions.

We began with one unit – Year 7: Gamechangers – which we felt lent itself to an oracy assessment. A small team put together resources including lesson slides, teacher guidance, an assessment matrix, and student-friendly assessment criteria. In the assessment lesson itself, students are in small groups (four max) and teachers spend time observing/listening to each group discussion. Students are given a statement and some prompt questions. As they discuss the teacher completes the oracy matrix on a tablet. Live marking was chosen for three key reasons:

- **To capture oracy skills in real time:** Oracy is best assessed in the moment as it involves tone, pace, clarity, articulation, body language, and responsiveness to others. Live marking also allows us to assess verbal and non-verbal communication.
- **Teacher workload:** Live marking eliminates the need for detailed post-lesson marking. Immediate feedback also means students can adjust and improve their performance within the lesson.
- **Structured assessment:** Using a simple, predefined rubric (linked to the Oracy Framework) allows for consistency and fairness. Teachers can use a checklist

during discussions, ensuring clear assessment without disrupting the flow of learning.

After initial roll-out, we gathered feedback from students and staff to refine our approach. This identified areas where students needed clearer guidance, such as structuring responses or using subject-specific vocabulary. It also helped streamline the process.

Next up for us is replicating the approach in other subjects so that it feels cohesive to students (work has already begun in history). We will also be supporting a common vocabulary and progression framework by partnering with Skills Builder to allow teaching of communication skills in tutor time.

## Top tips

Allow me to leave you with some top tips for oracy assessment:

- Choose the right framework. Consider what oracy skills you want to assess and adapt existing tools.
- Consider the training requirements for staff.
- Start small and scale gradually with a manageable assessment process.
- Consider how to ensure consistency across classrooms and teachers.

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## FURTHER INFORMATION

- ▶ Bohunt Education Trust: Gamechanger RE & Citizenship Oracy Assessment Matrix: <https://buff.ly/3D93MDY>
- ▶ Bohunt Education Trust: Oracy assessment resource: <https://buff.ly/3D767PL>
- ▶ Skills Builder: [www.skillsbuilder.org/universal-framework](http://www.skillsbuilder.org/universal-framework)
- ▶ Voice 21 & Oracy Cambridge: The Oracy Framework, 2015: <https://buff.ly/4gY6Al5>



# Strategies to support disadvantaged students

What exactly is the impact of disadvantage on students' oracy skills and what strategies can we employ to develop the spoken language – and confidence – of young people?

**W**hat is it that makes affluent students more confident and articulate, while their disadvantaged peers can struggle to assert themselves? And what can schools do to level the playing field?

## Six oracy challenges

**1, Enriching experiences**  
Affluent students are often immersed in a wide range of enriching experiences from a young age. Visits to museums, theatres, libraries, and cultural events expose them to new ideas and foster curiosity. They become comfortable navigating different social and intellectual spaces, building a reservoir of knowledge and experiences to draw upon in conversation.

In contrast, disadvantaged children may have fewer such opportunities. Economic constraints and limited access to transport or childcare mean these experiences are often out of reach. As a result, poorer children may lack key social and cultural capital.

But schools can replicate this exposure and build disadvantaged students' social confidence. Here are three ideas:

- Broaden cultural experiences and provide access to trips, performances, and workshops that enrich students' horizons and spark curiosity.
- Create authentic experiences, such as mock interviews or workplace scenarios, to help students practise navigating formal settings.
- Bring in professionals from a range of backgrounds to inspire students and model effective communication.

## 2, Vocabulary

Language is a key determinant of confidence and articulacy. By the age of seven, the gap in the

vocabulary known by children in the top and bottom quartiles is something like 4,000 words. Children in the top quartile know around 7,000 words (Biemiller, 2004). This "word gap" has profound implications.

In affluent homes, children are often engaged in rich, reciprocal conversations. Parents may use sophisticated vocabulary, ask open-ended questions, and encourage thoughts and feelings to be articulated. These interactions help children develop a robust vocabulary and the ability to express complex ideas.

Disadvantaged children, by contrast, may grow up in environments where talk is more functional and less frequent. This is not a reflection of parental care or love but often a consequence of economic pressures (parents working multiple jobs or coping with stress may have less time or energy). As a result, these children can start school with a smaller vocabulary and less practice in using language to reason/explain.

Teachers can help these students to find their voice. Here are three ideas:

- Create opportunities for structured talk, using activities like debates, presentations, and collaborative problem-solving to give all students the chance to practise speaking in a range of contexts.
- Explicitly teach academic and professional vocabulary and show students how to adapt their speech for different audiences and purposes.

**Matt Bromley**

*...is an education journalist, author, and advisor with 25 years' experience in teaching and leadership including as a secondary school headteacher. He remains a practising teacher. Find Matt's previous SecEd contributions via [www.sec-ed.co.uk/authors/matt-bromley](http://www.sec-ed.co.uk/authors/matt-bromley)*

- Model and scaffold, using sentence stems and discussion frameworks, to help students structure their responses and build confidence over time.

## 3, Confidence

Affluent students are often raised with an underlying belief that they have a right to be heard. This confidence is cultivated through opportunities to participate in activities like drama clubs, sports teams, and leadership roles, as well as with positive reinforcement at home and in school.

*By the age of seven, the gap in the vocabulary known by children in the top and bottom quartiles is something like 4,000 words*

Disadvantaged children may experience a world that feels dismissive and may internalise low expectations, shaped by societal biases or their own encounters with inequality. We must counter these messages. Here are three ideas:

- Recognise and reward students for their progress and perseverance, emphasising that ability grows with effort.
- Challenge stereotypes, using examples and role models to

show students that success is not limited by background.

- Explicitly teach self-belief, using positive affirmations, reflection and coaching to help students recognise potential.

While affluent children are often encouraged to question, challenge and explore ideas from an early age, schools can help disadvantaged students to develop these same habits.

- Use open-ended tasks, designing activities that encourage students to think deeply, evaluate evidence, and justify their reasoning.
- Create a classroom culture where curiosity is celebrated, and students feel safe asking questions.
- Teach problem-solving skills, providing frameworks and strategies for tackling complex problems independently.

## 4, Unwritten rules

Affluent students are often introduced early to the unwritten rules of formal situations. They learn how to make eye contact, shake hands, and engage in polite conversation with adults. They practise adapting their speech to suit different audiences.

Disadvantaged children may have fewer opportunities to practise these skills; they might find formal settings intimidating because they are unfamiliar.

Many disadvantaged children speak in non-standard dialects at home and may struggle to adapt to the formal language required in academic or professional settings. Teaching "code-switching" empowers them to navigate these contexts. Here are three ideas:

- Respect home languages, validating and celebrating the linguistic diversity students bring with them.
- Explicitly teach formal registers, showing students

how and when to use standard English, with plenty of opportunities to practise.

- Encourage pride in adaptability, framing code-switching as a skill that broadens horizons and increases agency.

## 5, Role models

Affluent students are often surrounded by role models who demonstrate confidence and articulacy. Disadvantaged children, by contrast, may lack access to such role-models. They might not see people like them in positions of influence or hear their own accents and dialects valued in formal or professional contexts. But schools can act as a bridge. Here are three ideas:

- Provide career education, offer workshops, mentoring, and exposure to careers that disadvantaged students may not have considered.
- Support applications and interviews, teaching students how to write CVs, complete application forms, and present themselves confidently in interviews.
- Offer financial support – ensure no student is excluded from opportunities due to cost.

## 6, Hidden curriculum

Affluent students benefit from the "hidden curriculum" – the unspoken lessons about how to succeed in society. For disadvantaged children, the hidden curriculum can be inaccessible. They may not know how to advocate for themselves or feel entitled to challenge authority.

But leadership roles encourage students to take responsibility, develop confidence, and practise articulating their ideas. Here are three ideas:

- Create classroom roles, assign responsibilities such as leading group discussions or presenting findings.
- Encourage participation in clubs and councils, ensuring disadvantaged students are supported and funded to take part in extra-curricular activities that build leadership and teamwork skills.
- Offer mentoring programmes, pairing students with older peers or professionals who can boost their confidence.



## Dialogic teaching

Dialogic teaching – an approach that places purposeful dialogue at the heart of learning – can play a crucial role in helping disadvantaged students develop the skills they need to speak with clarity, confidence, and precision.

As we have heard in this supplement, oracy is not simply about learning to talk, it is about learning through talk. Dialogic teaching amplifies this principle, providing a structured framework in which students can sharpen their verbal communication, deepen their understanding, and build the confidence to express themselves effectively in diverse contexts.

Dialogic teaching is about creating a classroom culture where dialogue drives learning. It involves more than surface-level exchanges – it is characterised by:

- Cumulative talk, where students build on each other's contributions to develop shared understanding.
  - Exploratory talk, where they test and refine ideas through discussion.
  - Reflective talk, where they evaluate their own and other people's perspectives.
- To harness the full potential of dialogic teaching for oracy development, try the following.

## Ground rules

Create a classroom culture where students feel comfortable contributing and where talk is purposeful and respectful.

- **Agree on norms:** Work with students to establish rules for listening, turn-taking, and challenging ideas constructively.
- **Model effective dialogue:** Demonstrate how to build on

others' ideas, ask thoughtful questions, and disagree respectfully.

## Open-ended questions

Stimulate rich, meaningful discussions by asking questions that encourage students to think deeply and articulate reasoning.

- **Thought-provoking prompts:** Elicit detailed responses with questions like "Why do you think that?" or "What evidence supports your view?"
- **Multiple perspectives:** Invite diverse contributions. Ask: "Does anyone have a different opinion?"

## Structured discussions

Provide frameworks that guide students to engage in productive dialogue.

- **Think-pair-share:** Allow students time to formulate their thoughts individually before discussing them with a partner and then sharing with the class.
- **Debates:** Organise debates on relevant topics, teaching students to construct arguments, use persuasive techniques, and respond to counterpoints.
- **Socratic seminars:** Use open-ended questions to facilitate student-led discussions on complex issues, encouraging deep exploration of ideas.

## Supporting talk

We might equip students with verbal tools that help them to participate effectively in dialogue.

- **Revoicing:** Encourage students to paraphrase or clarify other people's ideas to ensure understanding.
- **Building on:** Teach them to

extend or add to a peer's contribution, saying, "I'd like to add to that..."

- **Probing:** Show them how to ask follow-up questions, such as "Can you explain why?"

## Modelling oracy

We need to model good oracy if we are to help students develop these skills. When teachers consistently demonstrate good oracy, we provide a living example of what articulate, confident, and purposeful speech looks like.

Modelling good oracy is not about delivering polished speeches or adopting an unnatural formality; it is about showing students how to use language effectively to express ideas, engage listeners, and build understanding.

It requires intentionality and a focus on the nuances of spoken communication – tone, pace, clarity, and the ability to adapt to different audiences.

Modelling oracy is about setting the standard. By modelling good oracy, we can establish high expectations for communication, showing students the skills and behaviours they should emulate.

It is also about building a culture of communication because modelling oracy fosters a classroom environment where speaking and listening are valued and practised as essential tools for learning and collaboration. **SecEd**

## FURTHER INFORMATION

► *Biemiller: Teaching vocabulary in the primary grades. In Vocabulary Instruction, Baumann & Kame'enui (eds), Guilford, 2004.*

# Embedding the four strands of oracy

Fortis Academy used the Oracy Framework and its four strands of oracy teaching as the basis for integrating skills across the school

Oracy education must be accessible to all students, including those with SEND and other vulnerable learners. Fortis Academy in Birmingham aims to embody this through a focus on high expectations for all students and promoting equity through oracy. Fortis Academy is the largest mainstream secondary within the Shaw Education Trust with more than 1,300 students on roll – more than 900 of whom are identified as vulnerable.

## English inspiration

Just as with literacy skills, oracy is not the sole domain or responsibility of the English department. Nonetheless, colleagues in the English department have played a huge role inspiring and supporting the school's progress in this area.

The English department prioritises oracy to address low communication skills on entry and the need for structured, talk-rich environments, aligning with Ofsted's emphasis on "explicit teaching of spoken language, including vocabulary development and effective communication skills" (Ofsted, 2024).

Drawing on the Oracy Framework's four strands – physical, linguistic, cognitive, social/emotional (Voice 21 & Oracy Cambridge, 2015) – the curriculum improves students' spoken language across varied contexts, focusing on developing assured speakers and readers, benefiting especially vulnerable learners, including the high proportion of EAL students.

In line with the physical strand, the curriculum includes the pronunciation practice alongside vocabulary instruction.

Reflecting the linguistic strand, it offers explicit vocabulary teaching across key stages 3 and 4

### Anna Coulson

*...is director of English at the Shaw Educational Trust, a multi-academy trust comprising more than 30 schools in the Midlands and North West*

by embedding tier 3 vocabulary in each scheme of work.

Opportunities for practising pronunciation are mapped through reading for pleasure work and literary heritage texts at key stage 3, supporting students' deeper understanding of subject-specific terminology.

A focus on phonics has been introduced into foundation schemes of work, too, allowing further opportunities for deliberate practice.

This then extends into a variety of speaking and listening units in the summer term for years 7 to 10, combining paired, group and independent oracy work while enabling students to secure physical oracy skills.

This foundation ensures students are prepared for the spoken language assessment in year 10, and also allows them to develop collaboration skills, confidence, empathy, and respect for the perspectives of others.

There is also teaching of rhetorical techniques – including metaphor, humour, irony, and mimicry – from year 7 onwards. This is woven throughout the curriculum and explicitly linked to speaking and listening schemes of work.

In line with the cognitive strand of the Oracy Framework, the English department promotes critical thinking by integrating debates and discussions throughout the teaching of GCSE English language.

## Across the school

The English department's work has fed into the whole-school Teaching and Learning Strategy, directed by assistant head Madelaine Cassem. This ensures that subject curricula purposely develop students' proficiency in spoken language with deliberate opportunities (Ofsted, 2024).

The strategy focuses on the linguistic strand of the Oracy Framework by increasing opportunities for students to articulate their learning and ensuring teachers regularly check for understanding.

Last year, Fortis introduced cold-calling to help us assess students' understanding more effectively. By not accepting responses via hands-up nor via calling out, all students are prepared to contribute, with high expectations for participation – and thinking!

We have adopted "say it again better", too. Teachers accept initial responses, however basic, but then provide targeted verbal feedback – encouraging students to use tier 3 vocabulary.

This aligns with the Literacy Strategy which ensures tier 3 vocabulary lists are created for every subject area (10 words per-topic). At least one faculty meeting per half-term is dedicated to exploring these pedagogical approaches from a subject-specific perspective.

To scaffold teaching and contextualise new language, the curriculum integrates explicit vocabulary instruction using Frayer Models (graphic organisers), combining written, verbal, and visual elements. This supports the production of high-quality verbal responses.

In line with the cognitive strand, which emphasises organising and structuring ideas, the Teaching and Learning Strategy focuses on

developing students' ability to structure both spoken and written language.

To increase independence and support vulnerable learners, teachers have expanded their use of written, verbal, and visual scaffolds, guided by the Education Endowment Foundation's SEND five-a-day principles, which stress the importance of "providing scaffolds in a non-stigmatising way" (EEF, 2020).

We also use form time, when students have the chance to explore the use of scaffolding strategies for talk and writing.

## Next steps

Students now have greater independence to apply knowledge and skills, and growing confidence in speaking, but also writing so that the presentation of their work has improved over time.

We have seen SEND learners demonstrating measurable progress in particular.

Adaptive teaching methods also embed scaffolds across schemes of work, with faculties collaborating to produce resources to support oracy.

Staff and students have noted a marked rise in confidence, collaboration, and problem-solving abilities.

Students continue to feel more at ease when speaking in front of peers, and teachers observe more engaged group discussions and active participation.

Over time, these practices will continue to shape a long-term cultural shift in Fortis Academy's ethos around oracy, evidenced by changing student behaviours, higher expectations for classroom discourse, and a collective understanding that effective communication underpins both academic success and personal growth.

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## FURTHER INFORMATION

- EEF: *Special educational needs in mainstream schools, 2020:* <https://buff.ly/3gnm7hC>
- Ofsted: *Telling the story: The English subject report, 2024:* <https://buff.ly/3IkN9UO>
- Voice 21 & Oracy Cambridge: *The Oracy Framework, 2015:* <https://buff.ly/4gY6Al5>

# A wide range of oracy skills

At St Regis Academy oracy teaching and education is not just about speaking, but includes critical thinking, vocabulary, and social and emotional elements, too

### Maria Black

*...is head of English and oracy lead at St Regis CE Academy in Wolverhampton, part of the Three Spires Trust*

This is why oracy must be explicitly taught – and not just in subjects where presentations are expected.

A successful oracy education exposes students to strategies that enhance tone, voice projection, posture, and expression. These oracy skills cannot remain isolated within a few subjects – they must be woven into the fabric of all learning.

To help support this principle, starting in September, selected subjects will assess students through spoken language rather than written responses. Year 7 students will be the first to experience this shift, and based on the impact, we will refine and expand the initiative.

This approach doesn't just teach students to speak – it transforms the way they learn, engage, and express themselves across disciplines.

Known as SALAD Days, these half-termly events offer the chance for students to engage in meaningful conversations with peers and adults

## Vocabulary

At its core, oracy is about language – and language is power. Yet, for many students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, vocabulary gaps present significant barriers to engagement and success.

Students with limited vocabulary struggle to achieve academic success, express their thoughts clearly, and engage confidently in discussions. This is why classrooms must be rich in language – not just through written words but through active verbal expression.

We are addressing this challenge through:

- **Faculty-led vocabulary initiatives:** Every half term, subject-specific terminology is introduced and revisited throughout the curriculum.
- **Word of the Week:** A school-wide initiative where students are encouraged to use and apply advanced vocabulary in lessons.
- **Positive reinforcement:** Students earn "vocabulary points" for correctly using new words in context.
- **Scrabble Club:** A fun way for students to challenge themselves and expand their lexicon.

## Critical thinking

Great communication isn't just about speaking – it is about selecting purposeful information, structuring ideas cohesively, and delivering them with impact. Students must learn to refine their thinking so that their words carry weight: distilling their ideas, structuring their thoughts, and engaging their audience effectively.

We integrate the PEEEP model (developed by Talk the Talk) into our lesson planning – the PEEEP standing for Position, Explain, Example, Expand, Point).

This model helps students structure their arguments logically, ensuring their communication is clear, concise, and compelling. Teachers play a crucial role in this process. By verbalising their own thought processes – drafting, refining, and structuring their ideas in real-time – they model metacognition. Through CPD, our educators have been trained to

embed this practice into everyday learning.

## Social and emotional

Teaching students how to speak is only part of the equation. Teaching them to listen, engage, and respond respectfully is equally important.

Active listening, turn-taking, and respectful dialogue are the building blocks of strong communication skills and emotional intelligence.

Encouraging students to extend discussions, ask meaningful questions, and reflect on diverse perspectives fosters a culture of collaboration.

We cultivate this through structured oracy activities that encourage students to listen as much as they speak. This enables them to build constructive relationships, navigate disagreements effectively, and engage in discussions that challenge their own thinking.

## Final thoughts

A quality oracy education goes beyond giving students a platform to speak – it is about teaching them to speak with purpose, to listen with intent, and to engage with the world with confidence.

By focusing on presentation skills, deepening vocabulary, fostering critical thinking, and developing social-emotional awareness, we prepare students not just for academic success, but for life itself.

We recognise that embedding an effective oracy curriculum will take time, effort, and dedication. However, we are committed to this journey – because when students find their voice, they find their power.

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## FURTHER INFORMATION

- Talk the Talk: <https://talkthetalkuk.org/>



# A calendar of oracy events

Creating opportunities for ‘real’ talk is a priority at Kesteven and Sleaford High School, with a whole calendar of activities that help to foster students’ oracy skills

Opportunities for real talk, in carefully curated situations, are the best way of helping young people develop oracy skills. The trick is getting students who would normally leave the talking to their peers to have a go and provide them with the knowledge and skills they need to make talk successful.

At Kesteven and Sleaford High School, an 11 to 18 secondary school in Lincolnshire, oracy activities are woven throughout the school year to engage students in meaningful talk with real audiences.

In my experience, students can spot fake, teacher-invented oracy tasks a mile off and rarely take the tasks as seriously as we would hope. To combat this, we now schedule opportunities for students across year groups to engage in “real” talk, training students to develop speaking and listening skills across a range of activities and contexts.

**September** launches the importance of talk with students in every year group. We link purposeful talk with our school rewards system and brief students on how they can earn credits towards bronze, silver and gold awards.

Opportunities vary according to year group. Sixth-formers give Extended Project presentations while every year 7 student is paired with a year 8 buddy as part of transition work (with dedicated scheduled conversations).

We train all students how to perform leadership roles well, including public speaking, being engaging form prefects, or effective student council reps.

We train a group of student

wellbeing ambassadors who can support peers via conversations. A lot of this training takes the form of verbal role plays and scenario-planning – using talk and listening skills.

**October:** This is the time for open events and students are our best advert. Students in all year groups volunteer as school tour guides. They work in pairs to take families around to see the school at work or to meet teachers. Because students are familiar with the

“Every student is expected to take part in at least one assembly each year. Training is given and rehearsals take place”

school and its layout they feel knowledgeable and talk with confidence. We train students before the events, teaching them how to introduce themselves and what to do if the family runs out of questions. It is a great confidence-boosting, talk activity.

**November:** Form tutors oversee their form’s delivery of a 15-minute assembly to their key stage. Every student is expected to take part in at least one each year. Training is given and rehearsals take place. These are usually themed on one of the school values. The more confident students take on bigger roles, but all are encouraged to push themselves. Tutors need support too and this provides opportunity for staff training on facilitating talk.

**December:** Christmas offers lots of opportunities for formal and informal talk. A carol service sees

students providing readings (with training on voice projection, articulation and verse-reading), while a senior citizens party sees guests visit the school for an afternoon. Students put on quizzes, bingo, drama, and sit and chat with our guests.

The last day of term sees an informal assembly hosted by students, with thank you speeches to staff, talent show finalists, and reward winners collecting prizes. Younger students see older peers modelling informal talk for a whole-school audience. Training is offered in using microphones and speaking spontaneously or with prompt cards.

The most formal event is our senior prize-giving. Senior students share accounts of the year before assembled guests, celebrate successes in independently composed speeches, and give a vote of thanks to the guest speaker.

**January:** Our training day at the start of term often focuses on oracy with an ensuing focus on talk for learning in classrooms.

Facilitating group work is a topic we revisit frequently. We have used the well-known Walkthrus resources to structure training and we model group work skills in our teaching and learning cross-curricular groups. One of our best initiatives was the sharing of “Say it back better” challenges in classrooms, where teachers encourage students to repeat or improve on their initial responses to questioning with answers that use more considered subject terminology, clear articulation, or peer-supported development of first answers.

**February/March:** Often busy months for teacher interviews. We use students as much as we can in the interview process. Sometimes we use student interview panels, but in order to include as many students as possible we have a “speed-dating” activity. Students from different year groups work as

**Josephine Smith**  
...is headteacher of Kesteven and Sleaford High School, a secondary school in Lincolnshire, part of the Robert Carre Trust. Find Josephine’s previous SecEd contributions via [www.sec-ed.co.uk/authors/josephine-smith](http://www.sec-ed.co.uk/authors/josephine-smith)

mini-panels at tables of two or three. Interviewees travel round the room spending five minutes with each small group. An overseeing member of staff helps students to draw up suitable questions and then gathers feedback. Student-agreed chairs of the panels then meet with staff to summarise their feedback. Students also act as interview day tour guides.

**April:** Our school play takes place with many opportunities for all kinds of purposeful oracy activity – behind the scenes, planning, during rehearsals and in performance. Never underestimate just how much students learn by taking part in such an event. Involve all who want to join in and look to encourage those who don’t yet know that they want to!

**May/June:** Sport and oracy are great bedfellows and the summer term sees our sport ambassadors and leaders combine their sports skills with the oracy skills needed for great coaching of younger students. Links with local primary schools provide an admiring audience but we are conscious that students need advice on how to communicate specific instructions to a specific audience, often outdoors where there are lots of distractions.

Summer is also the time lots of our students attend residential visits with the opportunity to speak in unfamiliar situations. During day trips students are prepared in advance to ask questions of those they meet.

**July:** Similar end-of-term opportunities for talk as December, along with the presentation of student awards. In school students are trained for forthcoming roles in readiness for September.

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# Walk into any classroom and see it

Newsome Academy is a Voice 21 Centre of Excellence and has been working for five years to embed oracy across the school

Students at Newsome Academy are confident about sharing their thoughts and ideas on all manner of subjects.

The 11 to 16 school is passionate about the importance of oracy. Over the last five years, staff at Newsome, which serves some of the most disadvantaged areas of Huddersfield and where 47% of the 800-strong cohort receive Pupil Premium, have worked with Voice 21 to embed oracy.

Results have improved year-on-year and teachers have seen a marked difference in students’ writing, confidence and attitudes: “Oracy is now living and breathing within our school,” explained Krystyna Stokes, assistant headteacher for CPD. “You can walk into any classroom and see it.”

When Ms Stokes joined the school in 2019, she was keen to focus on student confidence and “their ability to articulate what they want to say and what they mean”. Supported by headteacher Dean Watkin, they began to embed structured and purposeful talk in classrooms and corridors.

Oracy is now a key part of the curriculum, woven into every academic subject, as well as extra-curricular activities and other aspects of school life.

Staff at Newsome – which holds Voice 21’s Centre of Excellence Award – receive regular CPD in oracy and they all wear Voice 21 badges to signify its importance.

Ms Stokes continued: “I didn’t want oracy to be a quick fix that the staff felt they had to add on to something they were already doing. I wanted it to be organic – something that has a purpose, that staff could really relate to and understand its importance.”

She began by introducing the Oracy Framework (Voice 21 & Cambridge Oracy, 2015) to staff in early 2020, including the four key

**Emma Lee-Potter**  
...is a freelance education writer. Find Emma’s previous SecEd contributions via [www.sec-ed.co.uk/authors/emma-lee-potter](http://www.sec-ed.co.uk/authors/emma-lee-potter)

strands that we have already encountered in this supplement:

- Physical skills, including body language, posture, eye contact and voice projection.
  - Cognitive skills, which focus on the content and structure of spoken language.
  - Linguistic skills.
  - Social and emotional skills.
- The framework is posted in every classroom, so every student understands and appreciates its importance.

Oracy features prominently at whole school seminars on Monday mornings, when teachers run through their expectations for the week and remind students of the key role that oracy plays.

“All new staff are given a full rundown on why we focus on oracy and the work of Voice 21,” explained Molly Holmes, the school’s lead oracy champion and a teacher of humanities.

“Oracy can sometimes be mistaken as being about presentational talks but that is only one aspect of it. It’s also about active listening and the importance of your body language when you are listening – it’s not about passive listening, it’s about working as you are listening.

“The aim is to have metacognitive learners who can reflect upon and express their own thought processes and make links with the learning that they have done previously – through their oracy but in relation to their written work and studies as well.”

Ms Holmes continued: “Oracy is important for all students but

especially those from lower income backgrounds who might not have the experience of having those discussions at home. Structured oracy tasks give them the scope to be able to speak confidently.

Oracy is consistent across every department and the majority of lessons feature some element of structured and purposeful talk – from questioning to full discussions. Students are also encouraged to use sentence stems to signal when they are building on or challenging each other’s ideas.

In English, for example, students read aloud in class and practise new vocabulary. They also have weekly literacy seminar sessions in which they read and discuss a text together.

In maths and science they are encouraged to verbalise their thought processes by explaining their answers and hypotheses, while in PE they might be asked to discuss in groups what went well, what did not go well, and what they are going to improve.

Teachers aim to ensure that every student’s voice is heard in the classroom. Seating plans are based around collaborative learning, with students sitting at tables or in groups.

Students are often asked to work in teams and to make sure that everyone is included in the conversation. Each student is given a set of “talk tokens” at the start of a task, with the expectation that they must be “spent” by the end of the lesson.

One person may be asked to act as a “talk detective”, observing the oracy skills demonstrated in the task, while another may be tasked with summarising the discussion.

“Talk tokens are a very simple but effective method,” Ms Holmes added. “They are something that every teacher could use. They are really useful to help less confident students, who may be fantastic at

actively listening and taking everything in, but maybe don’t feel as comfortable talking in front of others.”

The school also shows videos of effective discussions – some from Voice 21 and others made by Newsome teachers: “Giving them an idea of what a discussion should look like, what it should sound like and how it should be carried out is similar to helping them to plan out an exam question,” explained Ms Holmes.

“They need to see it done so they can understand how to do it themselves. It’s just the same as showing them a model answer.”

Teachers start by encouraging students to have discussions in small groups and in time confidence builds: “If you have taught the students explicitly how to have a discussion, you have modelled it to them and shown them what is expected of them, then the discussions they have in their smaller groups are practice for when they do a big talk in front of the class or the whole school.”

Ms Holmes left us with some final tips for getting started with oracy:

- It cannot be done overnight. It takes time to embed oracy across the school.
- Appoint a member of teaching staff to lead your school’s approach to oracy.
- Empower staff so they feel confident implementing oracy. Support them with time, resources and regular CPD.

## Final thoughts

The teaching staff have seen the growth in students’ confidence and independence. Ms Holmes said: “I was teaching philosophy, morality and ethics to year 8s today. We were talking about complex concepts of law and order. We were able to discuss the age of consent and I reflected that the level of discussion and depth that the students were able to reach independently wouldn’t have been possible without their oracy skills.”

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**FURTHER INFORMATION**  
► Voice 21 & Oracy Cambridge: The Oracy Framework, 2015: <https://buff.ly/4gY6A15>