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Speaking on one's own terms: oracy and orality as partners in classroom talk

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Abstract

Spoken language in schools, now often branded as oracy, is seeing something of a resurgence of interest. This is well-founded and to be welcomed. Nevertheless, the policy-level co-opting of oracy, as a concept open to various interpretations, raises questions concerning the desirable degree of prescription and conformity to be promoted in pupils' spoken language. Though often encompassing talk as pedagogy, oracy is strongly associated with developing the skills of spoken language. Such skills rest on a number of assumptions and norms around participation in talk that merit examination. This article explores common classroom orthodoxies in terms of who speaks, when they may speak and how they must speak. As a way of examining these orthodoxies, the article proposes a greater acknowledgement of *orality* alongside, and as a precursor to, oracy. Using an illustration from a real lesson, it argues that raising the profile of orality is a reminder of the importance of understanding and appreciating specific and diverse oral traditions before bringing to bear the generalities and possible standardisation of oracy.

Keywords: Oracy, orality, classroom talk, spoken language, participation, speech norms

Introduction

Spoken language in the classroom, now often branded as oracy, is having something of a resurgence in the UK. Oracy was strongly promoted in a 2021 All-Party Parliamentary Group inquiry report, was a well-publicised feature of the Labour Party's 2023 education policy announcements and, in 2024, was added to an update of the mandatory curriculum for beginning teachers in England.¹ There is real substance behind this interest, with decades of research attesting to the benefits of explicitly taught and carefully structured classroom talk for personal wellbeing, academic learning and collective agency.² Although those with long memories may

recall a similar wave of policy-level interest in the late-1980s that proved to be short-lived, there are grounds for optimism.

Nevertheless, there are also dangers of distortion and selectivity when well-founded ideas become adopted at the highest levels: the narrowing of assessment for learning to a late-2000s strategy largely focused on the formative use of testing provides one such precedent and cautionary tale.³ In a previous *Forum* article,⁴ I drew on the work of Aliza Segal and Adam Lefstein to consider the issue of authentic contexts for talk.⁵ Here, I shift the focus to some of the norms around participation that are bound up with oracy education. I return in more depth to one of Segal and Leftstein's four conditions for voice: being able to express ideas *on one's own terms*, or contributing in habitual ways to which one is accustomed. I question some assumptions about vocal participation and propose orality as an additional perspective to set alongside oracy.

The orthodoxies of classroom talk

Oracy itself is a somewhat slippery, ambiguous concept. It is sometimes framed broadly, to include learning through talk,⁶ but Andrew Wilkinson's original definition as 'general ability in the oral skills'⁷ and its current popular representation as an Oracy Framework of fourteen skills, could also have narrower connotations of normative performance.⁸ As just one facet of this, any ambition to express ideas 'on one's own terms' needs to be reconciled with the Oracy Framework's references to 'responding appropriately' or 'turn taking'. Indeed, classrooms are steeped in idiosyncratic rituals often very unlike everyday learning and it has been suggested that becoming a pupil is a matter of mastering an interactional code that is rarely explained.⁹ While oracy education goes some way towards making the tacit explicit, it is important to acknowledge that, in doing so, it codifies interaction in ways that are not value-neutral.

Examining classroom rituals around talk, a number of orthodoxies are discernible. An especially prominent example is the promotion of so-called standard English, enshrined in the English National Curriculum¹⁰ and echoed in the reference to 'formal register and vocabulary' in Ofsted's English Research Review.¹¹ The association of non-standard English with social collapse and falling standards more generally has been well-documented and criticised, as has the belief that addressing this

deficiency and closing a 'word gap' is a remedy for social inequalities.¹² The interactional tone of some classrooms has also been influenced by the turn towards memorisation of knowledge and the characterisation of teaching as instruction. Distributing participation 'democratically' among as many learners as possible is a long-standing cultural norm of English schools.¹³ In the knowledge-rich classroom, this is amplified by the perceived imperative to maximise vocal participation of all pupils – whether they opt in or not - in the name of systematically checking for recall.¹⁴

Of course, there are good educational justifications for some of these practices. The importance of gauging all pupils' understanding at strategic moments or promoting precise use of terminology in explanations is clear, for example. However, there are other purposes for talk. It is also powerful in promoting thinking and thinking is frequently messy, divergent and tentative ('groping towards a meaning', as Douglas Barnes memorably put it¹⁵). The fluidity of exploratory forms of talk is not always compatible with tightly prescribed times and modes for participation which emphasise convergent lines of thought and prescribed linguistic repertoires. If we are interested at times in pupils generating their own ideas and hearing diverse voices, it is important to examine some assumptions about participation and to consider what it means, in practice, to speak on one's own terms in a classroom. In this light, I ask three fundamental questions: Who speaks? When may they speak? How must they speak?

Questioning the orthodoxies of spoken participation

1. Who speaks?

Expecting verbal responses from as wide a range of pupils as possible is characteristic of some Western countries but this proxy for participation is not a universal stance. Despite the aforementioned evidence of the benefits of a talk-rich learning environment, there is a case for non-vocal participation at times. Norms of highly engaged silent participation in some cultures offer an interesting counterpoint. For example, Robin Alexander's comparative education work paints a vivid picture of Russian teachers - reflecting their more collective society – who work in depth with just a few pupils, where 'for the moment, that child is the class and all are participating.'¹⁶ There are many possible reasons for a pupil's silence and the

evidence linking individuals' attainment to their overt vocal participation is mixed.¹⁷ Meanwhile, insisting on universal vocalised responses may risk engendering a performative approach, geared towards easily-observable micro-strategies and pupil behaviours, rather than actual learning. An intriguing implication from the research of Sarah O'Connor and colleagues is that developing a culture of active listening may break the association sometimes found between spoken contributions in a whole-class forum and pupil attainment.¹⁸ For example, priming pupils to consider how they would rephrase another's contribution or making space for 'private' paired talk may go some way towards this. Meanwhile, it has been argued that, in many cultures, observable *behavioural* participation needs to be considered alongside other, more discreet, forms of engagement on cognitive and emotional levels, such as note-taking, personal reflection and a readiness to learn.¹⁹ Participation on one's own terms may sometimes involve the choice of *not* being a speaker, therefore.

2. When may they speak?

Oracy education includes an explicit focus on the terms of spoken engagement and pupil self-regulation, particularly in peer-to-peer talk. Resources defining, for example, group roles, 'talk moves' and attributes of good listeners²⁰ support the cultivation and embedding of 'ground rules' for discussion. While these structures potentially provide valuable temporary scaffolding, it is also important to acknowledge the inherent assumptions they represent. Eye contact, for example, still cited in some oracy resources²¹, reflects neurotypical and Western communication conventions. Ground rules more generally have been questioned for their imposition of white, middle-class norms of engagement, potentially privileging pupils who are familiar with these strategies and unwittingly reproducing and reaffirming societal inequalities.²² In the US, for example, Shirley Brice-Heath, Lisa Delpit and many others have highlighted an array of cultural differences in spoken interaction, including different expectations relating to interruptions, elaborations, 'holding the floor' and the role of teacher questioning.²³ Similarly, in Australia, universal classroom talk norms have been found to be inappropriate when confronted with fundamentally different ways of knowing and being among First Nations people.²⁴ Whilst, of course, a functioning classroom needs some boundaries around spoken contribution, they need to be negotiated with awareness of difference and modelled by the teacher too, as a member of the learning community.

3. How must they speak?

Turning finally to the manner of speech, the tenacious grip of standard English can result in the promotion of idiosyncrasies that are unhelpful in developing purposeful spoken language. A common example is the insistence on speaking in full sentences, frequently encountered in official guidance and replicated in some school policies.²⁵ Much of this is based on a faulty assumption, long debunked by linguists, that spoken and written language share a grammar - with the implication often that the former exists only to prime and therefore mimic the latter.²⁶ In reality, standard English is an arbitrary and ever-evolving reflection of the language of the powerful, and often confused with issues of accent diversity. Views differ on whether learning this language of power is a student's right or merely perpetuates oppression.²⁷ However, deficit, or gap, views of the 'non-standard' language of particular communities risk overlooking, or even demonising, non-standard but potentially rich and effective forms of talk.²⁸ A focus on evaluating speech for different purposes and audiences on a pragmatic basis through the explicit discussion of code-switching or style-shifting would be of greater use than an ideological adherence to a single arbitrary form for all contexts.

Oracy and orality

Questioning these orthodoxies offers a more critical perspective on oracy. In so far as the concept provides a unifying term to rally round in the cause of learning to and through talk, its current prominence is to be welcomed. Indeed, as its originator Andrew Wilkinson put it, 'not to have a word for a concept may be not to think at all about that concept.'²⁹ Nevertheless, what I have argued so far is that, despite the best intentions of many in the field, oracy's lingering association with skills development has the potential also to be constraining, at the very least, if interpreted narrowly. This is particularly important at a time when oracy may be gaining political traction. I have written elsewhere, for example, about policymakers' limited interpretation of the concept of cultural capital and its presumed links to spoken language.³⁰

The structured teaching and use of classroom talk is important, of course, but I suggest that, alongside oracy, we might seek to integrate a related concept, much

less frequently referenced in current educational debates: that of *orality*. Orality is sometimes associated with identifying distinctive ways of communicating and thinking in non-literate communities ('primary orality')³¹. However, it is also understood more generally as the characteristics of verbal, rather than written, communication in a particular community. Despite rarely being applied to classroom practice, this broader conception of orality nevertheless provides us with an additional perspective that helps to answer some of the questions this article has raised.

Oracy, even broadly interpreted, concerns the *skills* of spoken language and therefore, at some level, implies a judgment about performance. Orality, in contrast, implies no value judgment, merely denoting an oral *mode* of communication, and is associated with an interest in the distinctive oral traditions of particular groups. In contrast to oracy's focus on decontextualized and general language rituals of the classroom (codified, for example, in a framework), orality is inseparable from the individual orator.³² Orality therefore implies an interest in, and respect for, meaning-making in specific local contexts, including nuanced relationships between speaker and audience.³³ Both concepts, while categorically different, are useful tools for thought when taken together. If we approach our consideration of spoken language not only from a focus on the universal and the standard but also (and first) from an interest in differing standpoints and understandings, we might seek to understand and value local norms before building on these assets with a judicious focus on aspects of oracy. The way that this might relate to participation and expressing ideas on one's own terms is explored in the next section.

Seeing practice from two perspectives

By way of illustrating the power of these two perspectives in tandem, I invite you to consider a real episode of observed classroom practice.³⁴ In this talk-rich lesson it seems to me that Andy, the teacher, not only develops oracy skills but also values the orality his pupils bring with them.

At Eastland School, a culturally diverse inner-city setting, pupils in Andy's Year 9 group are beginning to consider what changes they would like to see implemented. This is a project that will eventually culminate in a relatively

formal speech, presented in front of an audience. However, the focus today is on collaboratively exploring the kinds of idea that might be worth pursuing.

Andy's lesson features a frequent switching between discussion in pre-designated small groups and wider sharing with the whole class. A progressive series of group activities has been planned, beginning with thinking about past experiences of change generally ('Think of a time when...') and moving onto discussing initial ideas for school-level change and then their own plans more specifically. Andy maintains a high pace through the lesson, partly through the variety of small group discussions but also because each is broken into tightly timed phases, often no longer than a couple of minutes. Groups are given prompts to guide their collaboration. They include reminders on the board such as, 'Ask clarifying and probing questions' and 'Tell me more'. The discussion tasks themselves are highly structured and offer visual frameworks for categorising ideas for school change including the evaluation of possible ideas for change using two axes to plot desirability and feasibility. All of this helps pupils to refine their thinking and keep talk focused and purposeful. 'Let's not waste time arguing for the same thing we've already got that's just a bit better,' suggests one group member.

The sharing of ideas in whole-class plenary mode is often prompted by overhearing conversations or by engaging with the table groups beforehand: 'Omar, I know you had a great idea over here – the one about times of the school day.' At other points in the lesson, Andy opens up the debate. Pupils are invited, for example, to suggest a connection between change, power and voice. Having briefly discussed this in groups, they are encouraged to share their thinking. 'You need power and voice to make change,' offers one. 'But even if you have power, you can't always make change,' replies another. Another student questions whether they can ever really have power in school, due to their position compared to teachers, Andy steps in and asks 'So can you be at the bottom of a hierarchy and still have some power?' This provocation reignites the debate and leads to another chain of contributions.

In another phase of the lesson, Andy makes a connection between the familiar talk roles that pupils have just used within small group dialogue and asks which might be most important as a tool for change. A debate ensues, with a strong argument being made for the role of Challenger: 'You can't develop other people's thinking without challenging or being challenged,' argues one student. As Andy manages these often-passionate exchanges, he takes care to notice pupils who have not contributed and draws them in by name, sometimes moving to stand alongside them.

Superficially, then, it is easy to see in Andy's lesson characteristic features of oracy education. Based on a seating plan and an initial talk task on the board, small groups, in a structured sequence, consider issues which will later build towards a formal spoken presentation. To support this, in his frequent whole-class orchestration of emerging ideas, Andy offers reminders about 'talk moves' that help conversations to flow, uses structured resources as stimuli and refers explicitly to the talk role of 'Challenger'.

From an orality perspective, however, other insights are possible. Eastland is a school where pupils with a wide range of heritages frequently speak a form of what is often termed Multicultural British English.³⁵ Although the pupils will later adapt their register for the eventual presentation to a wider audience, in this lesson of exploration among peers, Andy makes no attempt to 'correct' local dialect. While his control, direction and insistence on respectful interaction in whole-class episodes is evident, Andy is nevertheless reasonably tolerant of minor interjections as pupils argue passionately and authentically about these issues of real-life school change. Conversational guidelines are loose reminders, rather than scripted lines and table groups are able to use their discussion time as they choose. In Andy's periodic invitations to share ideas, he uses his knowledge of individuals' interactional styles. Some pupils volunteer to share but others – while vocal in their small groups – choose not to raise a hand. Through his eavesdropping, reading of body language and trusting relationships, Andy uses his judgment to invite contributions in other ways. Divergent ideas, including one questioning the lesson's very premise of student-led change, are given a platform and taken seriously.

While Andy's respect for diverse forms of orality is almost certainly largely intuitive, the articulated principles behind his oracy practice are revealing. Although he has high expectations of all pupils contributing to talk, Andy readily cites examples of adapting activities to allow for, and support, varied forms of participation. He also speaks of his belief in teachers relinquishing some 'power, control and authority' and avoiding 'restrictive' student talk:

Unless you get the mindset right and switch from a monologic to a dialogic mindset, then it's always going to be like Siri talking to Alexa.

To a great extent, then, Andy's pupils are able to speak on their own terms, with a distinction made between an initial authentic verbal exploration of an issue in this lesson and a subsequent 'performance' for an audience requiring a change of approach.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has not been to question the merits of a focus on oracy. On the contrary, raising the profile of spoken language in the classroom is well-justified and important. Instead, it is written in the hope that this moment of opportunity does not see a rich, multi-dimensional concept being co-opted in a reductive form to serve narrow and instrumental ends. As an example, witness former Schools Minister Nick Gibb arguing for the importance of oracy in 2019.³⁶ In Gibb's speech, oracy is equated to 'teacher-led interactions' with pupils engaged in 'structured dialogue with their teacher' to support 'delivery of a high-quality, knowledge-rich curriculum'. All of this is potentially valuable, but represents a distinctly selective interpretation, leaving little scope for expressing ideas on one's own terms. The call by Alex Quigley of the Education Endowment Foundation for clarity around the concept if oracy is to make a real difference ('What is oracy anyway?') is a reasonable one.³⁷ Perhaps a starting point, however, is first an acknowledgment that oracy, in whatever guise, should be a concept situated within, and respectful of, the specific features of local orality: oracy and orality as partners in talk.

Notes

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