

**Really saying something? Speaking up for authentic classroom talk.**

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Abstract

Pupils' talk within classrooms has recently seen a renewed focus of attention, usually under the banner of oracy. Much of the justification at policy level seems to stem from a 'levelling-up' agenda, based on oracy's distinctive contribution to enhancing opportunity through developing pupils' communicative competence with benefits for employability and attainment. Worthy and well-founded as these aspirations are, this article seeks to reassert, *alongside them*, the potential of oracy also to promote pupils' authentic voices and involvement in their own learning. Some criteria for avoiding 'voiceless' participation are used as a starting point for examining everyday classroom practice. Using real examples of recent practices, the article then shows how, despite the constraints of the current policy climate, teachers can and do find ways of ensuring authentic verbal participation in their lessons. They achieve this through the classroom conditions they create, the stance they adopt towards pupils' contributions and the purpose that talk serves.

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## Classroom talk and the revival of oracy

For advocates of spoken language in the classroom, there is cause for cautious optimism in England. After long fallow years at policy level, there are signs that the importance of pupils' talk might once again be recognised. However, in making a persuasive case for the contribution of spoken language to wellbeing, social justice and attainment, it is important to focus not only on pupils speaking, or even speaking well, but also on pupils *saying something*. This article therefore explores and exemplifies what might be meant by this type of 'authentic' pupil talk.

Despite the powerful - and enduring - arguments of reports including Bullock in the 1970s<sup>1</sup> and short-lived initiatives such as the National Oracy Project<sup>2</sup> and Language in the National Curriculum (LINC)<sup>3</sup> some three decades ago, spoken language has remained somewhat marginalised in recent curriculum, assessment and inspection frameworks. It has also been framed by successive governments' preoccupations with promoting 'Standard' English, together with a deeply-ingrained ideological suspicion of any form of oral pedagogy, or learning through talk.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, there are signs of hope. In 2021, an All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) inquiry report made a strong case for a greater focus on talk in schools<sup>5</sup>, while Ofsted's English Research Review of 2022, though provoking controversy, at least devoted a section to spoken language.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, the Voice 21 charity is a prominent example of an organisation actively campaigning and sharing practices with a growing number of teachers through training in specific classroom practices.

So, perhaps there are grounds for hoping that spoken language, now commonly branded once more as 'oracy', is having a welcome revival. Much of the current focus appears to emphasise two important benefits of oracy. One is what might be termed the communicative competence argument: a view that spoken language is a skill for life, a factor in social and emotional wellbeing and a tool for social mobility. Published in the immediate wake of the pandemic, the APPG report, for example, makes much of the need to address the consequences of socio-economic disadvantage.<sup>7</sup> Another prominent argument is for the cognitive contribution of oracy, the impact of specific forms of spoken language activity on academic outcomes having been well established through decades of research.<sup>8</sup> Both of these rationales are reflected in the widely-used Oracy Framework, which helpfully breaks down oracy skills into four categories: physical, linguistic, cognitive; social and emotional.<sup>9</sup> On this basis, it is not difficult to see why links have been made between oracy and the UK government's 'levelling-up' agenda.<sup>10</sup>

However, if oracy were to be valued *only* on these terms, this would risk implying a rather limited view of spoken language in the classroom (and one possibly involving a questionable deficit discourse). Indeed, 'oracy' as a term could itself be seen to imply a narrow skills focus if we return to its original definition by Andrew Wilkinson as 'general ability in the oral skills.'<sup>11</sup> It is imperative, therefore, not to lose sight of a third broad reason to value classroom talk. This is its potential for promoting pupils' involvement in their learning and in society by giving a platform for their views and for engaging constructively with those of others: arguably, the strongest social justice argument for oracy of all.

### Authentic classroom talk

Making the space to hear pupils' voices is particularly important in today's educational policy climate. Current English education policy prioritises a reductive vision of learning as the memorisation of a defined body of knowledge.<sup>12</sup> This knowledge is delivered through increasingly centralised standard pedagogical approaches at multi academy trust level<sup>13</sup> and is primed by a technical model of beginning teacher development as a set of routines to be mastered.<sup>14</sup> In this context, the potential to become a confident speaker, use language across the curriculum and co-construct understanding through discussion may be constrained by a convergent, limiting focus solely on accepted knowledge and speech practices. More 'authentic' spoken contributions also reflect, at the appropriate time, pupils' own interests and views and ways of communicating them.

Authentic classroom talk relates to the idea of voice, often associated with pupil consultation and involvement in decision-making.<sup>15</sup> It also aligns with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and its stipulation that children's views are expressed and taken seriously.<sup>16</sup> A model encapsulating these ideals is that of the dialogic classroom, in which there is a commitment to valuing multiple voices and perspectives and engaging in collective meaning-making. Robin Alexander's dialogic teaching model, for example, emphasises talk that is deliberative, cumulative and purposeful,<sup>17</sup> qualities that imply a genuine exchange of views, while Martin Nystrand and colleagues demonstrate the power of 'authentic questions' (for which the questioner does not know the answer) and of teacher engagement with subsequent pupil responses.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, this is not to say that every classroom that appears to be dialogic includes authentic classroom talk.

### Exuberant voiceless participation?

The work of Alitza Segal and Adam Lefstein,<sup>19</sup> based on research in Israeli classrooms, shows that superficially dialogic environments may in fact be based on 'exuberant, voiceless participation'. That is, pupils have a platform for talk and use it enthusiastically, but much of what is said is simply articulating the authoritative view of the teacher or curriculum. Segal and Lefstein propose four conditions for true voice:

1. Having the opportunity to speak: navigating the constraints often inherent in classroom conventions.
2. Expressing one's own ideas: recognising the 'official' voice as just one of many that are possible.
3. Expressing ideas on one's own terms: valuing diverse norms of communication.
4. Being heeded by others: seeking to engage with and build on what has been said.

For classroom talk to be authentic, pupils having the opportunity to speak is not enough. Going beyond this (conditions 2-4), however, raises potentially uncomfortable questions for teachers. Where pupils are genuinely free to express their own ideas, these may diverge from accepted knowledge, necessitating a skilled switch between authoritative and dialogic forms of interaction.<sup>20</sup> Sometimes pupils' authentic views may make for difficult listening if

they are free to express a dislike of aspects of their school experience. Expressing ideas on one's own terms may also challenge classroom norms, as teachers consider the extent to which it is acceptable for pupils to use their own vernacular or means of interaction when sharing ideas. The potential for insistence on Standard English and 'ground rules' for discussion, to perpetuate questionable middle-class values has been noted, for example.<sup>21</sup> And what of being heeded by others? This relates to genuinely cumulative dialogue and includes an expectation of teacher uptake and action based on pupil talk. In the current policy context, it is challenging to follow all four of Segal and Lefstein's conditions and go further than superficial dialogic practice. However, it is not impossible. In the next section, I offer examples of practice that go some way to meeting them.

### Authentic classroom talk in practice

I have recently been observing and discussing spoken language practice in primary and secondary classrooms around England in an attempt to capture, deconstruct and think about the underlying principles. While authentic talk was not the specific focus, looking back over these encounters with this perspective has been an interesting exercise. Three types of everyday action – broadly sequential, but inevitably overlapping - seem to serve the cause of authenticity well:

1. Creating the conditions
2. The teacher's stance
3. Talk with a purpose

I illustrate each of them here with anecdotes and examples from a variety of schools.<sup>22</sup>

#### **1. Creating the conditions**

Teachers set up provocative discussion tasks and encouraged open, safe exploration of ideas.

*Year 9 pupils in Adam's mathematics class file into their lesson after lunch. The room they enter has tables set out in groups and signs on the wall reminding occupants that 'questions are important' and 'mistakes are proof that you're trying'. An initial problem is posed on the board, presented intriguingly as an answer for which pupils must infer the preceding process. As discussion around tables begins, Adam reminds them, 'Talk about it on your table. It's important that if you don't fully understand, you discuss it.' Pupils talk through the problems, using personal mini whiteboards to work through and share their thinking with others. With a range of pupils around each table (within a mixed-attainment class), some arrive at answers more quickly than others. However, there is a commitment to articulating reasoning and trying to ensure that all members have understood, pausing where necessary to backtrack and break down a procedure into simpler steps for a peer. This emphasis is reinforced by Adam's prompts: 'If you're confident and someone's struggling, help them out.'*

Adam's lesson exemplified an environment geared to inclusive talk. The task was open-ended enough to allow for multiple responses; recording was only on mini-whiteboards, implying exploratory, provisional thinking and there was a commitment within each small group to ensuring pupils of all prior levels of attainment had the opportunity to participate. Open tasks facilitating platforms for multiple voices were a feature in other schools too. For example, during an oracy assembly, Years 3 and 4 children responded speculatively about the meaning of an ambiguous film clip and the teacher valued their divergent contributions: *'I love the way you said you disagree with both those ideas. That shows you were really listening.'*

If responses to open prompts are to be purposeful, however, pupil voices need substance behind them and Adam's mathematics students had the required background knowledge for the problem beforehand. Elsewhere, in a Year 6 classroom, pupils had been learning about the links between energy and poverty. As they prepared to embark on a debate, their teacher ensured that they were armed with fact sheets and other data so that their contributions, while personal, were well informed. Significantly, these pupils also had time to make sense of the issues and rehearse their arguments in small groups before stepping onto the whole-class stage, often being invited in at strategic moments by the teacher on the basis of eavesdropping on the preceding discussion. Key Stage Two pupils from another school summarised the value of having this kind of space and licence to engage with peers' differing perspectives constructively:

*[in small groups] there's no right and wrong answers. It doesn't always have to be what someone else thinks because you have your own opinions.*

*You can say you disagree with them and see if one of you perhaps doesn't realise or hasn't said what they wanted to say.*

## **2. Teacher stance**

Teachers identified opportunities for peer talk not always involving overt adult mediation and they made flexible judgements about appropriate language registers.

*Mark's Year 11 pupils are learning about alcohol and drugs. As they enter, chairs are already set out in trios and warm-up talking points are on the board. Without initially offering his own views, he invites others to contribute on each point: 'What do you think? Same or different? Build on it.' The discussion then turns to what might influence one's decision-making on these issues and the trios rank seven factors including religious beliefs, friends and family. As they share, pupils are expected to justify their thinking and by now a more spontaneous form of building on one another's ideas is evident. Mark's role, in response, shifts from being at the centre of the conversations, eliciting contributions, to one based on drawing together and comparing the emerging ideas: 'So Zahid's argument and Anna's argument seem to be polar opposites. Is that right?' As the discussion activities progress, the emphasis at all times is on pupils talking to their peers ('Say it to them. It's not me who's*

*important') and there is a willingness to work with and follow a pupil's line of thinking in some depth.*

This was a classroom in which the teacher had the confidence to cede centre-stage. The subject matter lent itself to personal responses drawn from experience and the withholding of the 'authoritative' voice allowed for free-flowing and revealing discussions. While creating this space, Mark's role was nevertheless far from passive. Instead, he skilfully orchestrated the voices, often juxtaposing contrasting views to bring out salient points for debate.

This willingness sometimes to step back and to focus on the uptake of pupils' ideas is not the sole preserve of the secondary teacher, however. Towards the other extreme of the school age range, Year 1 pupils learning about everyday Victorian life were led through a sequence of open-ended tasks, with facts gradually fed in at opportune moments, allowing them to work out and compile aspects of the daily life of a Victorian chimney sweep or scullery maid. Their teacher's interventions were again subtle and responsive, revoicing children's emerging questions, for example, and supporting peer-to-peer presentations. Making room for listening to pupil voices through peer-to-peer interaction can also be supported using technology. In a Year 7 classroom, pupils debated the potential of autonomous vehicles. Using a microblogging tool on tablets, small groups engaged in debate not only with their immediate neighbours but with groups across the room. Sorting and building on others' ideas in this way allowed for part of the lesson to feature authentic pupil debate that was not always mediated through the teacher.

Another aspect of a relinquishing a degree of control concerns the teacher's stance towards Standard English use. If authenticity is partly about speaking on one's own terms, then register and audience rather than uniformity and correctness become the concerns. In one case, a senior leader explained how she shared her thinking explicitly with pupils:

*It's about having that openness with the students. Sometimes I have to say, 'OK, you've got these sentence stems and it's great to hear you using them when you feed back to the whole class, but now for five minutes I just need you to have a chat. It's fine, I don't speak like that all the time so just be relaxed because this is about generating ideas now and working out what your opinion is.' If they feel you're too hung up on formal speech and being articulate you squash their ideas, effectively. It's getting that balance.*

### **3. Talk with a purpose**

Teachers ensured that some talk-based tasks had genuine outcomes beyond the lesson itself.

*In Sam's Year 1 class, the children have just taken part in some whole school activities related to sustainability and now this provides a rich stimulus for discussion. Sam sets up some provocative talking points using the format: 'The best thing about X was Y' and invites the children to agree or disagree...Pupils share their reasoned*

*responses with a partner, while Steve joins the discussion in some pairs, sharing ideas in an authentic way and modelling the talk structure. At one point, Sam interjects when points become too one-sided and asks everyone to think of a counter-argument. There is no shortage of vigorously expressed views on these close-to-home environmental issues.*

While the talk in this classroom was relatively structured in its form, the context and content were authentic. In this school, action arose from talk. Previously, single-use plastics had been banned and action taken on the packaging of school meals. At another school, a similar sense of agency was evident as Year 9 pupils began to consider the changes they would make around the school (past examples had included changing the times of the school day and introducing drinking fountains). These older pupils were able to switch between registers, engaging in heated debate in informal language at their tables but also anticipating a formal presentation in which they would make their case to a wider audience.

Having an audience for one's talk in itself gives a sense of purpose. In a Year 6 classroom, for example, pupils had been working on articulating the reasoning behind solving multistep mathematics problems. After sharing with one another, they were asked to capture their explanations for children in another class. Pupils adapted their scrawled mini whiteboard jottings into more coherent notes and proceeded to record onto tablets for the parallel class to play back. Finally, purpose for talk may be seen also as a longer-term goal. One secondary school had introduced lessons badged as Voice (seen as broader than oracy) and was instilling in its young people ambitions to make a difference in the world. Fittingly, the last word goes to one of their Year 9 pupils:

*Talk enables you to have your own interpretation of the world. We can't just be robots following an overlord. We're in a free society and we've got our liberty. The school always emphasises we've got a voice to change the world. If we want to change the world, we need our own views and opinions...When I'm older, I aspire to be part of the House of Commons.*

### Conclusion: dialogue and Discourse

In these brief insights into classroom practice, it is possible to see encouraging signs of authentic talk. Using Segal and Lefstein's criteria as one reference point, the examples reveal pupils sharing their own views in meaningful scenarios, with a measure of freedom in how they do so and having their ideas taken seriously. Of course, what has been presented in this article is a set of snapshots. Unseen here are the episodes, before and after, of teacher-led input and more structured approaches to talk which make these moments possible. Authentic classroom talk does not mean that anything goes. Far from it: these pupils would measure up well against the Accountable Talk model, which emphasizes speakers' accountability to the class community, knowledge and rigorous thinking.<sup>23</sup> What is clear, however, is that authenticity is not impossible to achieve, even the current policy climate in England.

Ultimately, the way that pupils talk has a significant influence on the way that they think. In other words, everyday talk (or discourse with a little 'd') is part of the wider way that pupils

think, act and develop their values (Discourse with a big 'D').<sup>24</sup> If authentic participation is empowering, authentic, high-quality dialogue helps, for example, to heighten awareness not only of one's own position on an issue, but also the contrasting perspectives of others.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, if we wish to foster a socially-just Discourse in classrooms, going beyond conformity, correctness and reproduction of the status quo, we need to note and value these aspects of spoken language. This means being vigilant that the current interest in oracy is not *solely* enacted as a short-term focus on proficiency, attainment and the closing of perceived gaps through growing vocabulary and using pre-specified sentence structures and roles. Alongside this, we also need to allow space for authentic voices engaged in constructive dialogue about real issues as part of a Discourse of collaboration, exploration and openness.



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