



Assessing Oracy for Learning



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Introduction



Oracy has always been at the heart of teaching and learning in classrooms that exhibit great teaching.

Oracy is not a new concept or conversation piece. However, what is now starting to change is the growing recognition of oracy within the education system and government.

October 2024 saw the release of “We Need to Talk” - a new report from the Commission on the Future of Oracy Education in England (2024). The report shows the intent of the commission to make oracy the fourth “R” in education - alongside reading, writing and arithmetic.

If the commission’s aims are to be realised, we will start to see oracy being demonstrated, assessed and given feedback on throughout every classroom in England, in every subject.

Reading, writing and arithmetic have long established methods for assessment and feedback. Oracy is potentially harder to assess.

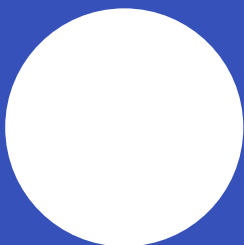
When assessed in the classroom it is public, when assessed privately it is time consuming. It is harder to capture than writing and vaguer than reading and arithmetic.

The aim of this eBook is to outline the current context of oracy in education and to provide evidence-based ideas on best practice for assessing oracy for learning.

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Defining Oracy

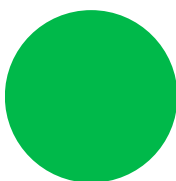


Oracy has been defined by the Commission on the Future of Oracy Education in England as:

“Articulating ideas, developing understanding and engaging with others through speaking, listening and communication.” (2024)

The term “communication” is used here to recognise other forms of related communication, such as sign-language, non-verbal and Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC).

It makes sense to have a common language around oracy and this is the definition which is likely to be the most used by practitioners.



A Brief History of Oracy



Wilkinson and the Birth of 'Oracy'

Oracy was first coined by Andrew Wilkinson (1965). Wilkinson argued in his book that teachers had neglected the importance of oracy. He believed that education systems overly focused on written communication, neglecting the skills and benefits associated with effective spoken communication.

Wilkinson's vision was for the spoken word to have the same level of importance as the written word in education. He defined oracy not as a subject, but as "a condition of learning in all subjects."

Piaget, the Plowden Report and Vygotsky

Whilst Wilkinson may have been the first to talk about *oracy* specifically, others have also studied the importance of collaborative language and learning.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, education has gone through a number of changes. Some argue that some of these can be attributed to the influence of Jean Piaget.

When The Plowden Report (1967) was published, it played a pivotal role in shaping the future of primary education in England, incorporating much of Piaget's theory (1952) on the importance of children learning through exploratory play and discovery. The report argued for a less teacher-led instruction and a more progressive approach that placed importance on social aspects such as collaborative and active participation.

Another notable figure that has contributed to our understanding of how children learn is Lev Vygotsky (1978). Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist and teacher, developed a theory about how our social interactions influence our cognitive development.

Vygotsky placed a large emphasis on the social process involved in learning, importantly that it required social interaction and was not a passive process.

Impact of the Education Reform Act

The introduction of the Education Reform Act (1988) brought with it the introduction of The National Curriculum, SATs and GCSEs and league tables. This meant that educators needed to have progress and results at the forefront of their minds when planning and teaching.

This was followed soon after in 1992 by the Education Act that introduced Ofsted. As a result, some might argue that educators' focus was now less on the way that children learnt, but what content they learnt. Many criticise the way that teachers now 'teach to the test', rather than teaching what individual children need. However, a standardised curriculum meant that there was consistency across schools and standards of teaching and learning were monitored more closely.

The National Curriculum

Since its inception in 1988, the National Curriculum to date has gone through four iterations. The first revision in 1995 addressed concerns that the original curriculum was too prescriptive and content-heavy, aiming to simplify it and reduce the administrative burden on teachers, while allowing more focus on skill development. The 2000 revision reflected shifts in educational priorities, incorporating the growing importance of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and literacy across all subjects, while providing schools with greater flexibility to tailor their teaching. The most recent update in 2014, spearheaded by Michael Gove, emphasized a knowledge-rich approach with higher academic expectations, particularly in English, mathematics and science. This version introduced more challenging content, including programming in computing and a stronger focus on British history.

Voice 21

In this century, oracy has slowly started to evolve towards Wilkinson's original vision. In 2014, The University of Cambridge developed the 'Oracy Framework' in partnership with School 21, to help provide a structure for assessing oracy with their Year 7 students. The Research Project lasted two years and was funded by the Education Endowment Foundation.

During the final stages of the project the components were brought together to create an 'Oracy Curriculum, Culture and Assessment Toolkit' and a Voice 21 website was made to provide guidance to schools on how to use the toolkit.

This was the start for the national charity of Voice 21, which would soon be at the heart of oracy in the UK. They have lobbied government, created research reports and studies to raise the profile of oracy in schools and government.

Oracy Cambridge

Founded in 2016, Oracy Cambridge exists to promote oracy in schools and in the wider community.

Oracy Cambridge are an expansion of the original research team of Professor Neil Mercer, Paul Warwick and Dr Ayesha Ahmed who created the 'Oracy Framework' in partnership with School 21.

Just like Voice 21, Oracy Cambridge are a pivotal organisation in driving the narrative and practice around oracy forward.

The Commission for the Future of Oracy in England

The Commission for the Future of Oracy in England is an independent commission who launched a call for evidence on Friday 15th March 2024. Through the evidence obtained they released their report on the future of oracy in October 2024 called "We Need To Talk".

The report argues that oracy is the fourth "R" in education and should have the same importance as reading, writing and arithmetic - similar to Wilkinson's original vision.

This report will hope to influence the upcoming Curriculum and Assessment Review (2024)

The Curriculum and Assessment Review

The Curriculum and Assessment Review (2024) aims to evaluate and reform the UK education system with a focus on socioeconomically disadvantaged students and those with special educational needs (SEND). There are plans for these recommendations to be published by 2025.

This review aims to create a more cutting-edge, broad, and inclusive curriculum that prepares students for life and work, while maintaining high academic standards.

One of the main goals is to ensure that children from all backgrounds benefit from a curriculum that addresses challenges like inequality and socioeconomic disadvantages. It also aims to assess whether the current curriculum sufficiently prepares students for modern workplace skills, like digital literacy and communication, while considering ways to make assessments less burdensome for both students and teachers.

This review may be impetus for oracy to begin being embedded into the curriculum on a par with reading, writing and arithmetic.

Learning How to Talk and Learning Through Talk

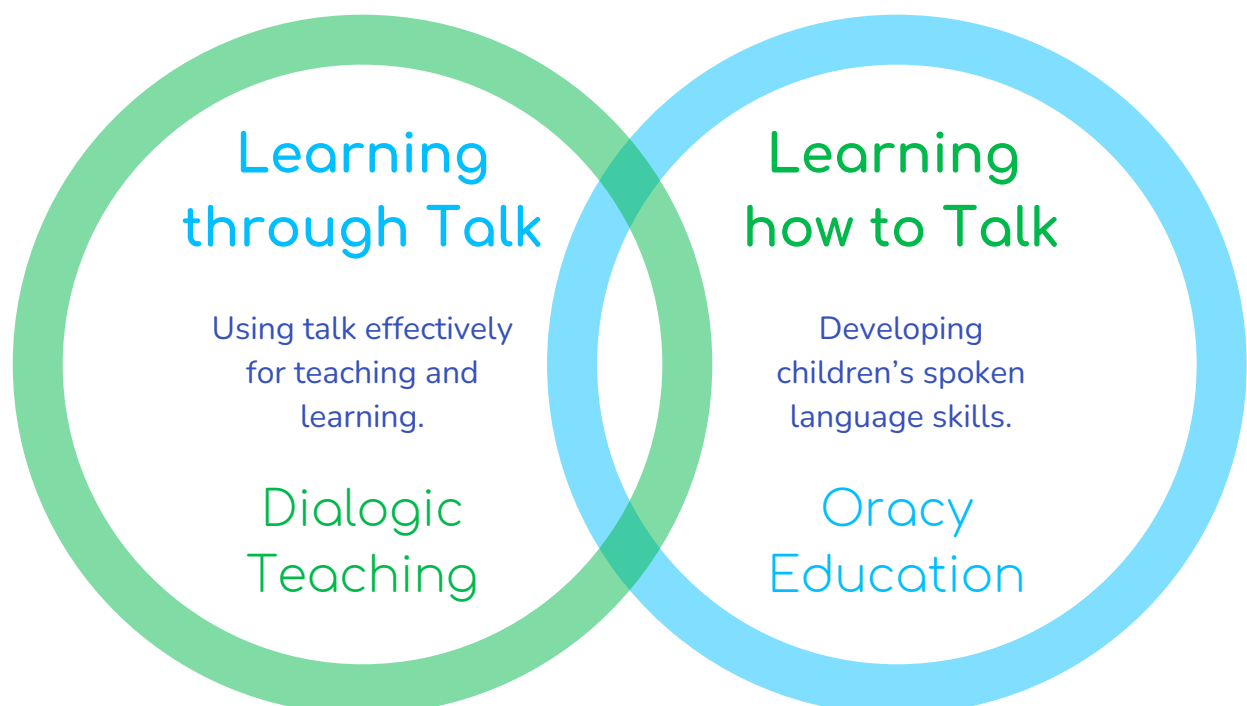


The Education Brief (Oracy) (Cambridge Assessment International Education, 2021) explains oracy as having two aspects.

The first concerning a teacher's effective use of talk in the classroom (dialogic teaching). The second being the explicit teaching of spoken language skills to students: helping them learn how to talk, (oracy education). Learning through talk, or dialogic teaching, has been shown in studies to promote educational attainment (Alexander, 2020).

The Education Brief provides not only the Oracy Skills Framework, but also a number of practical tips for teachers. This includes tips on how to scaffold meaningful class discussions, how to teach presentation skills, debating skills and listening skills. All of these *need to be explicitly taught*, as well as allowing students to learn through talk, for them to become fluent in oracy. For many pupils, schools may be the only place to explore and develop spoken language skills.

Therefore, many researchers and teachers now believe oracy should constitute a significant part of every child's educational experience.



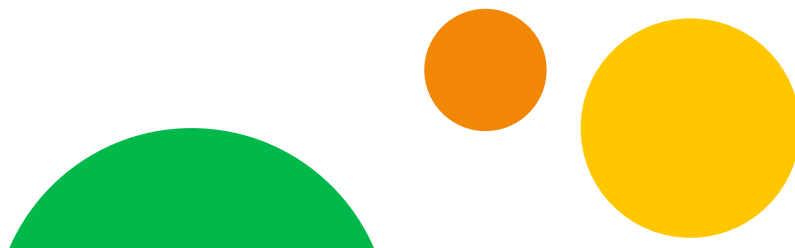
What does the National Curriculum say about Oracy?



The most up to date National Curriculum (2023) sets out what children should be taught in each Key Stage. These objectives are shown below.

In Key Stage 1 and 2:

- listen and respond appropriately to adults and their peers
- ask relevant questions to extend their understanding and knowledge
- use relevant strategies to build their vocabulary
- articulate and justify answers, arguments and opinions
- give well-structured descriptions, explanations and narratives for different purposes, including for expressing feelings
- maintain attention and participate actively in collaborative conversations, staying on topic and initiating and responding to comments
- use spoken language to develop understanding through speculating, hypothesising, imagining and exploring ideas
- speak audibly and fluently with an increasing command of Standard English
- participate in discussions, presentations, performances, role play/improvisations and debates
- gain, maintain and monitor the interest of the listener(s)
- consider and evaluate different viewpoints, attending to and building on the contributions of others
- select and use appropriate registers for effective communication



In Key Stage 3:

- speak confidently and effectively, including through:
- using Standard English confidently in a range of formal and informal contexts, including classroom discussion
- giving short speeches and presentations, expressing their own ideas and keeping to the point
- participating in formal debates and structured discussions, summarising and/or building on what has been said
- improvising, rehearsing and performing play scripts and poetry in order to generate languages and discuss language use and meaning, using role, intonation, tone, volume, mood, silence, stillness and action to add impact



In Key Stage 4:

- speak confidently, audibly and effectively, including through:
- using Standard English when the context and audience require it
- working effectively in groups of different sizes and taking on required roles, including leading and managing discussions, involving others productively, reviewing and summarising, and contributing to meeting goals/deadlines
- listening to and building on the contributions of others, asking questions to clarify and inform, and challenging courteously when necessary
- planning for different purposes and audiences, including selecting and organising information and ideas effectively and persuasively for formal spoken presentations and debates
- listening and responding in a variety of different contexts, both formal and informal, and evaluating content, viewpoints, evidence and aspects of presentation
- improvising, rehearsing and performing play scripts and poetry in order to generate language and discuss language use and meaning, using role, intonation, tone, volume, mood, silence, stillness and action to add impact

What does the Current Government say about Oracy?



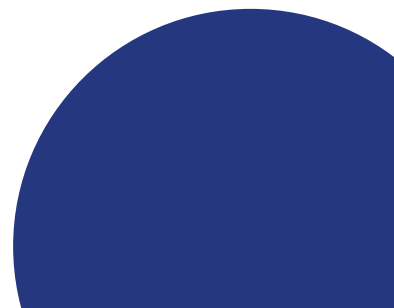
The Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer (2023), has made it clear how he feels about oracy: "The ability to speak well and express yourself should be something that every child is entitled to and should master." He went on to say, "But the curriculum doesn't allow us to provide this. This is short-sighted. An inability to articulate your thoughts fluently is a key barrier to getting on and thriving in life." Further to this, Starmer said, "It's not just a skill for learning, it's also a skill for life. Not just for the workplace, also for working out who you are – for overcoming shyness or disaffection, anxiety or doubt – or even just for opening up more to our friends and family."

The Government has recently launched a Curriculum and Assessment Review on the 25th September 2024. The aim of this review is to seek views on the current system of assessment and the curriculum, with the view of assessing whether it is fit for purpose. This review is being chaired by Professor Becky Francis, CEO at the Education Endowment Foundation. All elements of the current system will be reviewed, including "communication" in all of its forms.

An official statement has said: "The government's ambition is for a curriculum that delivers excellent foundations in reading, writing and maths, and ensures every young person gets the opportunity to develop creative, digital, and speaking and listening skills particularly prized by employers."

Education Secretary, Bridget Phillipson (2023) has stated: "And oracy, the ability to speak and to listen, needs weaving into our curriculum. It's about giving children the confidence to find their own voice, and to hear the voices of others. To be part of a society which is plural, tolerant, egalitarian, noisy: above all, democratic."

The Commission on the Future of Oracy in England will hope that their recommendations in "We Need to Talk" will influence the government with this new review. Given the fact that oracy is a key agenda item for the current government, our prediction is that this looks very likely.



The Importance of Oracy



Research shows that when children start school, those from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to have much weaker spoken language skills compared to their more advantaged peers. These gaps widen as they progress through school, with children on free school meals being twice as likely to fall below the expected language level by age 11, compared to 1.6 times at age 5. Upon leaving school, poor verbal communication skills often lead to difficulties in securing employment and increased risks of mental health issues. (Voice 21, 2024).

Furthermore, the Education Endowment Foundation rank 'Oral Language Intervention' (or 'Oracy') as one of the most impactful strategies for improving learning. They state that this strategy can add an additional 6 months of learning on average (EEF, 2024).

Oracy is a key skill that underpins learning across the curriculum. Unlike subjects such as mathematics or science, where assessments are largely based on clear, measurable outcomes, oracy presents unique challenges due to its subjective nature. Assessing a student's speaking abilities requires attention not only to the content of what is being said but also to delivery, clarity, and engagement with an audience. Back in the 1950s, talk was discouraged more than encouraged, by teachers. The phrase 'children should be seen and not heard' was perhaps something that many teachers believed half a century ago. However, this began to change in the subsequent years.

The Commission for the Future of Oracy in England have argued that oracy deserves to be the fourth 'R' in education, alongside reading, writing and arithmetic (2024). This is in response to the growing evidence base on the importance of oracy and the requirement for a coherent and clear plan to deliver pedagogy and assessment of oracy well.

Impact (months):

+6 months

How do we Assess Oracy?



Over the past few decades, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of oracy in schools, particularly in developing critical thinking and social skills. However, standardising oracy assessment remains difficult. Unlike more knowledge-based subjects, such as mathematics and science, speaking and listening, or oracy, cannot be 'tested' in the same way.

The Oracy Skills Framework (Mercer et al., 2017)

One tool that can help in the assessment of oracy is the Oracy Skills Framework (OSF). This is a structured framework that breaks down the complex skill of speaking and listening into measurable components. The OSF was originally published in 2017, but has been updated very subtly by Oracy Cambridge and Voice 21 in 2020. This version breaks down oracy into four areas: physical, linguistic, cognitive, and social and emotional. Each area has sub-classifications which help you to understand the components of oracy.

This tool allows educators to teach specific skills explicitly (focusing on learning how to talk), as well as to support students with specific feedback about which areas they need to develop. It is important to note that the OSF has not been designed as an assessment rubric and is not intended to be used in this way.

The OSF has the potential to become a lethal mutation if it is used punitively, the key is to implement the framework with the right purpose. It provides a fantastic starting point for explicitly teaching oracy, but it is certainly not something that should be used for high stakes judgement of students or teachers.

Voice 21 have a 'Curriculum Design Toolkit' which maps out ideas for how to implement 'The Oracy Framework' across all key stages. Oracy Cambridge also provide an 'Oracy Assessment Toolkit' which provides some structure of how you can use forms with GOLD, SILVER, BRONZE ratings to better assess oracy for learning (T-SEDA Collective, 2023).

Ultimately, the OSF needs to be implemented with purpose to be valuable. This framework can be a fantastic tool for providing feedback, praise and support when explicitly teaching oracy. However, as oracy is a particularly difficult skill to reliably assess, schools will need quality training across departments to understand what oracy is and how to identify each skill to assess well.

The Oracy Framework (Oracy Cambridge & Voice 21, 2020)



T-SEDA

The University of Cambridge (2023) has a toolkit that teachers can use with tasks and assessment ideas called T-SEDA (Toolkit for Systematic Educational Dialogue Analysis). However, as with many assessment tools for oracy, these will be subjective to the person observing.

The toolkit available through the University of Cambridge comes with exemplar videos to support and is much more than a framework or rubric. Support tools such as these are extremely helpful to educators since there is not one exam or test that assesses how well a student can meet the different skills that make up speaking and listening. There is no test for how well a student makes eye contact during a presentation or how lively and engaging they are in their talk.

What T-SEDA does provide is a dialogue coding scheme (outlined on p. 14) that is useful for formative assessment of dialogic teaching (learning through talk) or of peer discussions. It could be an effective framework to use as an Early Career Teacher to develop dialogic teaching methods or to work with through instructional coaching.

Used in combination with the Oracy Framework (which focuses more on learning how to talk), T-SEDA could help practitioners to develop better oracy amongst their students through more collaborative pedagogy.



Dialogue Coding Scheme (T-SEDA Collective, 2023)

Dialogue categories	Contributions and Strategies	What do we hear? (Key Words)
IB – Invite to build on ideas	<i>Invite others to elaborate, build on, clarify, comment on or improve own or others' ideas / contributions</i>	'Can you add', 'What?' 'Tell me', 'Can you rephrase this?' 'Do you think?' 'Do you agree?'
B – Build on ideas	<i>Build on, elaborate, clarify or comment on own or others' ideas expressed in previous turns or other contributions</i>	it's also', 'that makes me think', 'I mean', 'she meant', 'following on...', 'building on...',
CH - Challenge	<i>Questioning, doubting, disagreeing with or challenging an idea</i>	'I disagree', 'But', 'Are you sure...?', '...different idea'
IR – Invite reasoning	<i>Invite others to explain, justify, and/or use possibility thinking relating to their own or another's ideas</i>	'Why?', 'How?', 'Do you think?', '...explain further'
R – Make reasoning explicit	<i>Explain, justify and/or use possibility thinking relating to own or another's ideas</i>	'I think', 'because', 'so', 'therefore', 'in order to', 'if...then', 'it's like...', 'imagine if...', 'could',
CA - Coordination of ideas and agreement	<i>Contrast and synthesise ideas, evaluate, express agreement and consensus; Invite coordination / synthesis</i>	'agree', 'to sum up...', 'So, we all think that...', 'summarise', 'similar and different'
C – Connect	<i>Make pathway of learning explicit by linking to contributions / knowledge / resources / experiences beyond the immediate dialogue</i>	'last lesson, 'earlier', 'reminds me of', 'next lesson', 'related to', 'in your home'
RD – Reflect on dialogue or activity	<i>Evaluate or reflect "metacognitively" on processes of dialogue or on learning activity; Invite others to do so</i>	'dialogue', 'talking', 'sharing', 'work together in the group / pair', 'task', 'activity', 'what you have learned', 'I changed my mind'
G – Guide direction of dialogue or activity	<i>Take responsibility for shaping activity or focusing the dialogue in a desired direction or use other scaffolding strategies to support dialogue or learning</i>	'How about', 'focus', 'concentrate on', 'Let's try', 'no hurry', 'Have you thought about...?'
E – Express or invite ideas	<i>Offer or invite relevant contributions to initiate or further a dialogue (ones not covered by other categories)</i>	'What do you think about...?', 'Tell me', 'your thoughts', 'my opinion is...', 'your ideas'

Implementing Formative Assessment of Oracy

The requirement to assess students' oracy skills, means many teachers feel the need to gain evidence. This is not always essential to deliver good oracy pedagogy, we are generally fans of evidence, but evidence collection needs to be reasonable and there are significant logistical challenges with collecting oracy 'evidence' as not every school has audio or video capture equipment that is easily accessible, many lack a clear place to store and share recordings and teachers also need to have clarity on what to assess.

Some ways to clearly gather evidence is to record students' discussions or presentations. This evidence can then be looked at with reference to a framework such as the Oracy Skills Framework (OSF), to give feedback and understand students' capabilities in the various skills that make up fluency in oracy. Others make notes from lessons or ask students to record themselves speaking or presenting. With advances in technology, there are more and more digital tools and apps that could be used for formatively assessing oracy.

Simple Feedback and Formative Assessment

Vibbl have developed a leading tool for the formative assessment of oracy. Teachers provide explicit feedback and praise to students in relation to the OSF through Vibbl and students can also self reflect to become more meta-cognisant of their own oracy skills.

Using Vibbl, teachers upload video or audio evidence into their computer and then assess it using the OSF. Teachers can select whether they share this with their students or prompt students to self-assess to build metacognition of oracy skills. Feedback loops can also be established to explicitly help students gain key oracy skills and to praise and add direction to students who are learning oracy skills (2024).

Vibbl is very helpful for formatively assessing oracy as it provides a central repository to store all of your evidence in one place and promotes active collaboration on oracy.

Where Vibbl adds value is through the ability it's ability to provide clarity and purpose to oracy implementation through a shared process and language. To this end, Vibbl can be a fantastic asset for any school looking to formatively assess oracy well at scale.

Implementing Summative Assessment of Oracy

There is currently no single source of truth for summative oracy assessment.

A good summative assessment should be as valid and reliable as possible. This is because summative assessments are usually attached to high stakes (for example, a student passes or fails a module based on the assessment). If an assessment is going to hold that level of power and influence over a student's future, we must be able to trust it. So what makes a reliable and valid assessment?

Reliability: Is the assessment accurate and consistent over time?

Validity: Does the assessment assess what it intends to measure? Does the assessment provide information that is valuable and appropriate for the intended purpose?

It is important to note that there is no such thing as a completely reliable or valid assessment. There are no 100% valid or reliable assessments. Broadly speaking, the reliability of an assessment comes down to a combination of its design and how it is marked. The validity of an assessment is more a question of how the assessment is designed (Kime, 2017).

The role of an awarding body or government department will be to create a summative oracy assessment that is as valid and reliable as possible - if we even need a "high stakes" oracy assessment?

As oracy is a subjective concept, this task is not simple and there are several bodies exploring different ways in which oracy could be assessed in a more standardised way.

So, how may oracy be summatively assessed in the future?

We do not really know at this stage, but here are some possibilities:

1. **Increasing reliability through methods like comparative judgement.** This is the key assessment method Voice 21 and Oracy Cambridge are currently working on to make oracy assessment more reliable. If they can create this successfully it will certainly help. However, comparative judgement may potentially be quite time-consuming with audio files.
2. **Increasing reliability through AI assistance.** One of the challenges of making an assessment more reliable comes from reducing implicit bias. With a topic like oracy where accents, tone of voice, gender may significantly impact how humans assess recordings. Studies have shown that AI has the potential to increase reliability in assessment (Richardson & Clesham, 2021) and within the context of oracy this may make sense. However, it is worth acknowledging that AI also has implicit bias. Although AI can increase reliability, it can also bake in and scale bias, which is problematic.

The Future of Oracy?



As we look to the future of oracy, it is vital to recognise its role as a cornerstone of effective learning.

Oracy is a vital skill that needs teaching explicitly. Professionals in schools and colleges can use a number of tools alongside their expertise and knowledge.

By prioritising oracy in education, there is hope that all students, whatever their background, will be equipped with the verbal skills necessary for success in both academic, professional and social settings.

There is hope that with support in oracy, students will be ready for everything that life has in store for them.

Oracy as the 4th “R” in education

At the risk of sounding like Bill Nighy in Love Actually, oracy is all around us.

It is already part of the fabric of learning just like reading, writing and arithmetic. If the government’s Learning and Assessment Review (2024) focuses on formalising the assessment of oracy, there is likely to be more pressure on schools and teachers to understand oracy and to assess oracy.

How that may happen, we will have to wait and see.



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About this eBook

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