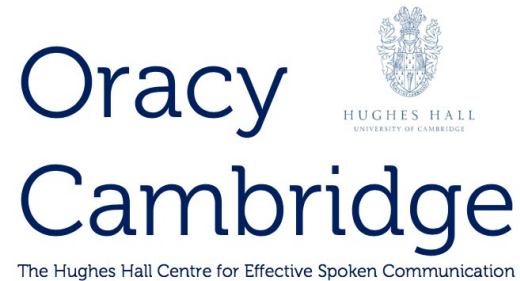


Oracy: becoming a good speaker and listener

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Education brief: Oracy

Oracy refers to the skills involved in using spoken language to communicate effectively.

What is oracy?

The term 'oracy' was first used by a British professor of education, Andrew Wilkinson, in the 1960s to emphasise the educational importance of spoken language skills; he wished to put them on a par with literacy (reading and writing) skills (Wilkinson, 1965). Wilkinson defined oracy as 'the ability to use the oral skills of speaking and listening'.

In recent years, the term has come to be used more widely and internationally, reflecting a growing awareness of the importance of developing young people's spoken language skills for their own futures and those of their communities. Moreover, recent educational research has shown that the effective use by teachers of talk in the classroom – in terms of vocabulary, tone, etiquette and so on – can have a strong impact on their students' educational attainment. It has therefore been argued that oracy should be made part of the normal, mainstream school curriculum in all countries (English-Speaking Union, 2016).

Although cultural norms regarding politeness and the appropriate forms of language to use in different social settings may vary, the essential skills underpinning oracy are not specific to any language or culture. For example, the same key principles underpin how to make an effective spoken presentation to an audience, or use talk to work well in a group or team.

What does research tell us about oracy?

In recent years, researchers in developmental psychology, linguistics and education have emphasised the importance of talk in children's cognitive and social development (Whitebread et al. (Eds.), 2013). This idea was first expressed by the Russian psychologist Vygotsky, who recognised the central importance of language and interpersonal communication for cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978) and it has since been developed by other researchers (Daniels, 2001). Research from neuroscience and evolutionary psychology now supports the view that language has evolved as an integrated component of human cognition, rather than as a separate and distinct capacity (Mercer, 2013).

Humans have a great capacity for learning and, uniquely, a special capacity for learning language: which in turn enables us to learn from, and with, other people. By acquiring language, we become able to not just interact, but to interthink (Littleton & Mercer, 2013). That is, we are able to think not only as individuals, but in collaboration with other people. In this way, humans have (for better or worse) transformed the world.

However, young people depend on interaction with others for the development of their communication and thinking skills. Most will need the help of their teachers to become effective speakers and listeners. Through educational research, we now know some very practical ways that teachers can provide the relevant guidance and instruction.

Learning through talk

Using talk effectively for teaching and learning

Dialogic teaching

Learning through talk

Learning how to talk

Learning how to talk

Developing children's spoken language skills

Oracy education

Three aspects of oracy

Learning through talk

Using talk effectively for teaching and learning

Dialogic teaching

Learning about talk

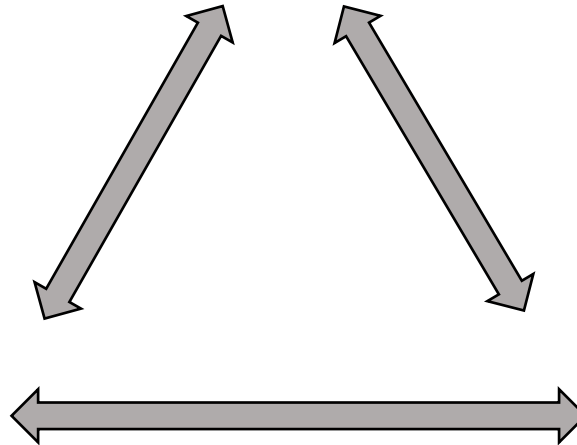
Understanding the nature of spoken language and how it works

Oracy education

Learning how to talk

Developing students' spoken language skills

Oracy education



1. Learning through talk

Do the ways teachers talk affect the quality of education?



Learning through talk

Using talk effectively for
teaching and learning

Dialogic teaching

The Cambridge Classroom Dialogue research project

(2015 – 2017: we observed 72 teachers in 48 UK primary schools)

Students (aged 10-11) improved significantly more on statutory tests of Maths and English when teachers did *all* of the following...

1. achieved **high levels of participation** in classroom dialogue
(e.g. numerous children contribute to a whole class discussion and discuss each other's ideas)
2. encouraged children to **elaborate** their ideas
(e.g. 'Can you explain a bit more what you mean by that?')
3. encouraged the **questioning** of ideas by students
(e.g. 'Do you agree that Tom is right?')
4. organised productive **group work**

(Howe, Hennessey, Mercer, Vrikki & Wheatley, 2019)

This is Dialogic Teaching

A dialogic teacher:

- gives students some 'talking space' to think aloud
- asks questions which encourage thoughtful, reasoned answers
- allows students' contributions sometimes to shape the dialogue
- balances authoritative presentation with interactive dialogue

(Alexander, 2020; Mercer, Wegerif & Major, 2019)

Two kinds of teacher-led talk

Authoritative Presentation, in which the teacher:

- does most of the talking
- informs students about a subject through a prepared talk, lecture or demonstration
- instructs students on how to carry out some task or procedure
- checks students' knowledge through specific questions about subject content

Interactive Dialogue, in which the teacher:

- talks less
- does not immediately judge students' contributions as 'right' or 'wrong'
- gives several students opportunities to elaborate their thoughts
- expects students to justify their ideas with reasons
- encourages students to question ideas and ask about things they do not understand

Teacher-student interaction: example 1

An English class in a Russian primary school. The teacher has just set up a collection of soft toy animals in front of the class.

Teacher: Have you got any toy animals at home? Be quick. Raise your hand (*she raises her own hand*) and show me. Have you got any toy animals? Sergei?

Sergei: (*Standing up*) I have got a cat, a

Teacher: No, sit down, in your place.

Sergei: Yes, I have.

Teacher: I have got many?

Sergei: Toys at home.

Teacher: Toy animals at home.

Teacher-student interaction: example 2

An English language class for immigrant teenagers in London. The teacher had asked each of the students to list their own personal qualities, both positive and negative.

Teacher: Who would like to tell the class about their personal qualities? Dalia?

Dalia: (*reads*) I am polite, friendly, organized, trustworthy, responsible but sometimes I am impatient and unpunctual. Sometimes (*laughs*).

Teacher: Good, isn't it? (*Addressing the class*) Thank you, Dalia. That was good. Now can you tell me the positive qualities you have just said.

Dalia: Yeah?

Teacher: That is, friendly, um, organized.

Dalia: Right

Teacher: How is it helping you...with your friends in the class?

Dalia: It help me to get along with people and to understand them and help them.

Teacher: That's good. And what about the, the not very positive ones like unpunctual

Dalia: Sometimes

Teacher: What happens then?

Dalia: Sometimes I lose my friend basically of that because I lose my temper very quickly.

Teacher: And what happens with me? I don't smile at you that much do I?

Some examples of 'dialogic' strategies

1. Ask not just one – or just 'the usual suspects' – but **several students** for their ideas about a question/problem
2. In some sessions, encourage students to **take long turns** and **elaborate** their ideas
3. Ask students to **comment on each others' views**
4. **Hold back explanations/corrections** of answers until you have heard what several students think
5. Use what you have heard to shape subsequent **authoritative presentations**
6. **Always take reports back** from group discussions

2. Learning to talk: oracy education

- Oracy skills are typically seen as less important than skills in writing and reading; but they are vital in the world today
- Most oracy skills are **not language specific**
- Oracy skills can be taught
- Most children's home experience will not teach them all the relevant skills: school is their only second chance
- Employers worldwide want workers with good communication skills

Learning how to talk

Developing students'
spoken language skills

Oracy education

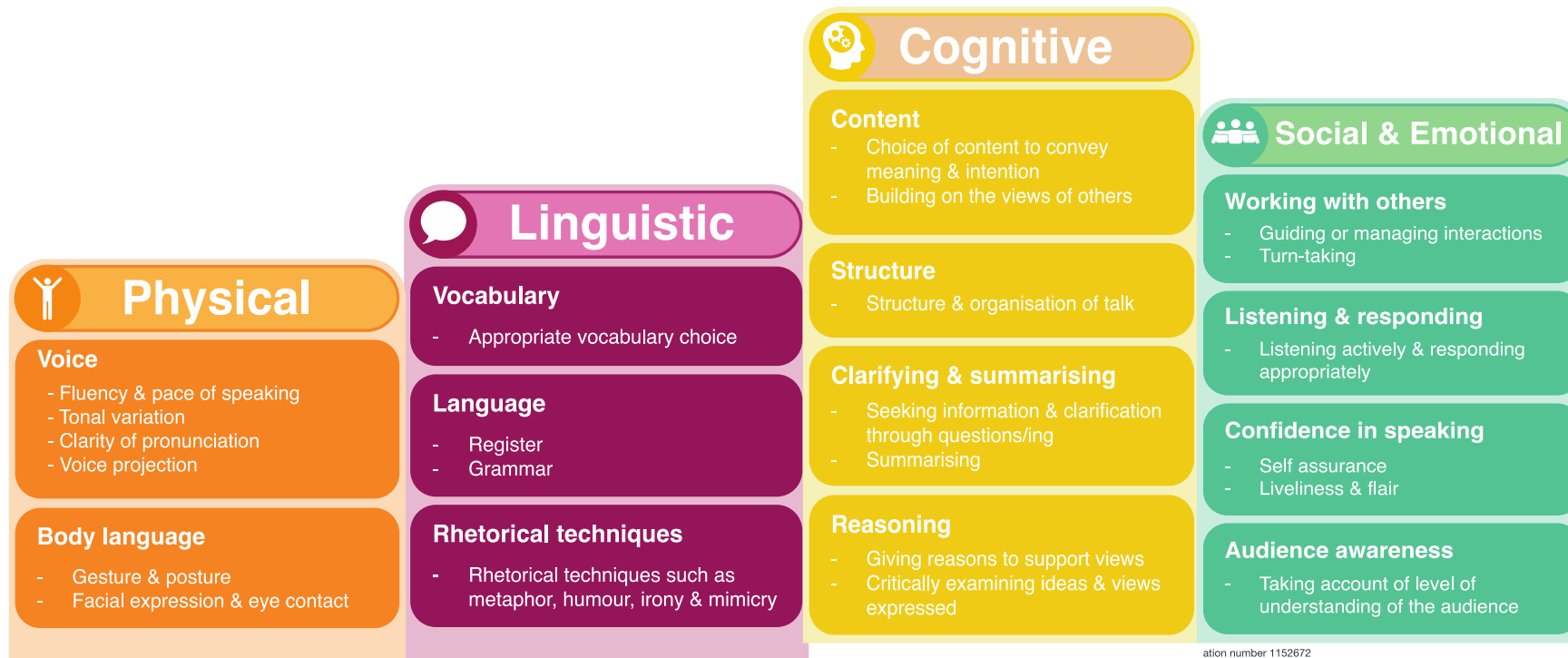
What oracy skills can (and should) be taught?

- How to present ideas clearly and confidently
- How to listen carefully
- How to talk and work well with others
- How to help someone learn

The Oracy Skills Framework

Oracy: The Four Strands

Use the oracy framework to understand the physical, linguistic, cognitive, and social and emotional skills that enable successful discussion, inspiring speech and effective communication.



What oracy skills can (and should) be taught?

- How to present ideas clearly and confidently
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Oracy skills: presentation

- *Physical*
 - fluency and pace
 - voice projection
- *Linguistic*
 - appropriate vocabulary
 - grammar
- *Cognitive*
 - structure and organisation
 - choice of content
- *Social*
 - confidence
 - audience awareness

What oracy skills can (and should) be taught?

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Five reasons why group-based activity is good for developing language learners' oracy skills

1. Group work increases the amount and variety of language *input*
2. Learners *interact* more with other speakers; thus their *output* is increased
3. Learners have more responsibility for clarifying their own meanings
4. Learners are listening to the target language as well as speaking
5. Language is used purposefully, in context

(McGroarty, 2005; Mercer, Mannion & Warwick, 2019)

Cue cards for a group discussion

What do
you think?

Why do
you think
that?

I agree
with ...
Because...

I disagree
with ...
Because...

Could you
say more
about...

What does
our group
think?

Role play in an EFL Year 6 group: interviewing a witness

Andreas: Well Mrs Carter, I need to ask you some questions about the night of eight June. Is that OK?

Eirini: Yes of course.

Andreas: What time did you got home?

Eirini: Well... I got home at about seven in the evening.

Andreas: Did you hear anything strange?

Eirini: No, I didn't hear anything strange.
I always listen to music when I'm at home.

Andreas: Did you....did...I sid....did you see Ms Bullock?

Eirini: No I didn't see Ms Bullock that night. I saw she was out.

(Tsakipidou, 2012)

3. Learning about talk: oracy education

- raising students' awareness and understanding of how talk is used in its social context
- helping them see why oracy is important for their own lives, in and out of school
- helping them to deal with prejudice and misunderstanding about ways of speaking

Learning about talk

Understanding the nature
of spoken language
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Oracy education

Talking about talk in a Primary class

Teacher: Did everyone have a turn at having a conversation today?

Children: Yes!

Teacher: How did that work?

Hywel: Because we went like three or two people were talking – we – two people or one person stopped so the others could talk

Tom: Yeah because it is important that other people get a turn...

Max : ...so they get another chance of talking

Teacher: And why is it important Max for everyone to have a go at talking?

Max: Because so they know what we're talking about...

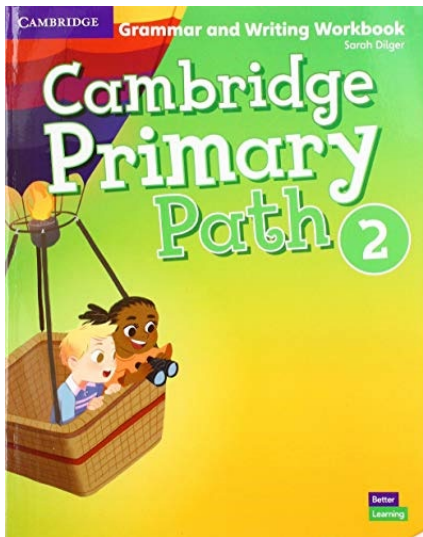
Meg: ...and you can listen to them – their ideas

Elli: I agree with Meg, you need to listen and wait for your turn to add on...

Meg: ...then you can learn

(Edward-Groves & Davidson, 2020)

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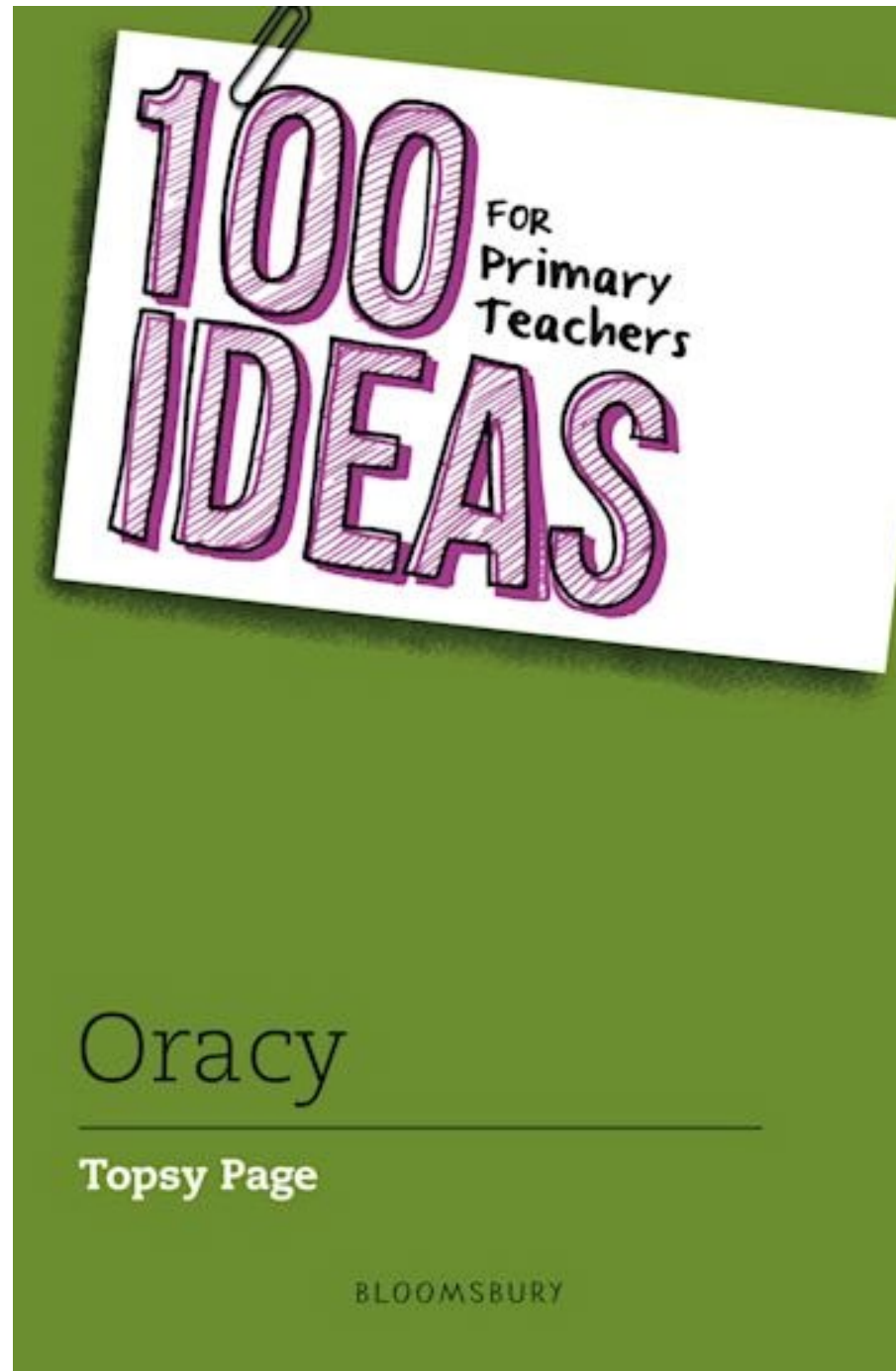


A research-based approach to English teaching: The Cambridge Primary Path

- **Cambridge Primary Path's** oracy syllabus is based on the Cambridge Oracy Skills Framework.
- These skills are linked to *can-do statements*, with students assigned a level:
- **Foundation; Apprentice; Developing; Confident.**

How oracy is taught

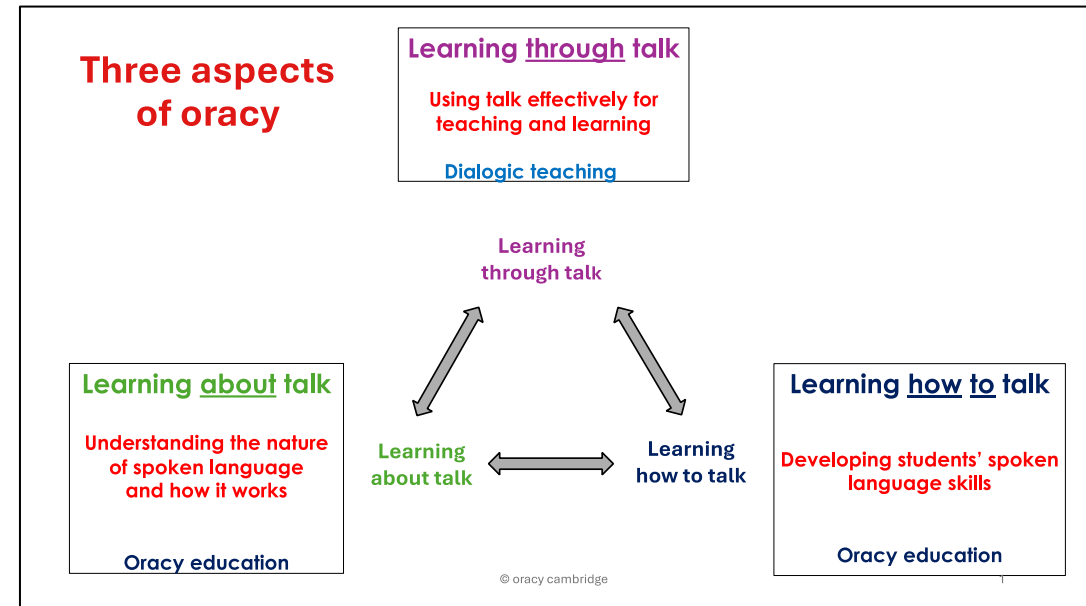
- Each CPP unit presents the target oracy skill via an animated oracy video.
- Students practise the oracy skill through a task and observe each other.
- Cue cards provide the functional language students need to complete the task.
- Students reflect on their skills in Check Your Oracy.



100 ideas or Oracy for Primary Teachers

[100 Ideas for Primary Teachers: Oracy: : 100 Ideas for Teachers Topsy Page Bloomsbury Education](#)

What happens if a school focuses on oracy?



- Students **participate more**, and more **actively**, in class
- Students learn how to use spoken language **to get things done**
- They become better at **reasoning** – *together and alone*
- Their **attainment improves** – not just in English, but also science, maths...

For more information...

Thinking Together

<https://thinkingtogether.educ.cam.ac.uk/>

Oracy Cambridge

<http://oracycambridge.org>

Cambridge Dialogue Project

<https://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/research/groups/cedir/projects/>

Cambridge Primary Path

<https://www.cambridge.org/us/cambridgeenglish/catalog/primary/cambridge-primary-path>

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