Introduction

The Uses of Oracy

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Who has the authority to tell others how they should talk? Whose way of speaking is better? Who listens the wrong way? How much difference do communication skills really make? Far from being questions of interest only to teachers and policy wonks, these questions have always also been an obsession of British popular culture. As George Bernard Shaw (1914) knew over a century ago, people attach strong emotions to other people's voices: 'the moment an Englishman opens his mouth, another hates him'. What is fascinating is how these emotions are often quite hard to place on a political spectrum.

To see how difficult this can be, let's step back a generation to consider a cartoon from the British tabloid *The Daily Mail* from 2002.[1] Two middle-aged skinheads walk past burned-out cars on a desolate urban street. A newsstand outside an Asian corner shop reads '*Migrants must learn English*'. One complains that people 'shouldn't be allowed in the country if they can't f****** well speak f****** English properly'. The image dates from a moment in the early 2000s when efforts to address speaking skills were last being debated under a UK Labour government, including a push for language tests for incomers to the country. Like many other journalists, television sitcom writers and provocateurs of the time, the reactionary cartoonist Mac gleefully turned this debate into uncomfortable satire.

But the humour is complicated. On one level, this is simply age-old class-based mockery of the feral poor. Yet the issue of immigration makes the point more ambiguous. Certainly, the cartoon invites us to look down on the coarse language of the white working class. But it also invites us to laugh at the yobs' hypocrisy, potentially putting us on the side of the Patel family, who probably speak English far more 'properly'. The real target of the humour, you might say, is not how people speak, but the very notion that anyone, including the state, could try to control people's voices. We are encouraged to roll our eyes at the government for trying to reform the speech of immigrants, when they

[1] The author of the image, the well-known cartoonist known as 'Mac', isn't a fan of his work being quoted in books like this. This is a shame. However, the image is easily found online.

should be doing something instead about inarticulate 'natives', who can't even hear how inarticulate they are.

This cartoon is part of an endless popular debate about the politics of speaking and listening, that rages continually on YouTube, Tik Tok, on television and across all forms of journalism. As this example shows, it is a debate that quickly turns into a culture war over class, immigration, social decline and cultural power. It also shows how ambivalent any attempts to 'improve' how ordinary people communicate will always be. What can educators or the state do to change how we talk, whether we be white working class or Asian migrants? What can the state do to stop people speaking – and listening – like these skinheads? What would the benefits to society be?

In the two decades since that cartoon, a word has entered the popular consciousness that brings a lot of these tensions into focus: the word *oracy*. It was coined in the 1960s by British educational researchers as a new way of referring to 'speaking and listening'. And it has recently become one of the most eagerly debated ideas in UK education, with growing importance internationally.[2] An 'oracy movement' has grown up, of charities, training companies and researchers to promote this educational idea as a way of addressing anxieties around social mobility, the threat of technology and AI to jobs, and the fate of liberal democracy. In 2023, oracy suddenly became front page news, when the UK Labour Party made it a flagship education policy. This educational approach looks set to influence the schooling of millions in a new generation of pupils, in the UK and beyond.

Oracy education is a political Rorschach blot in which a wide array of interest groups can see their own goals and fears reflected. Supporters celebrate it for conflicting reasons. Progressives champion a renewed focus on confident communication as a tool for social justice. Conservatives express delight at what they see as a back-to-basics effort to combat declining standards of civility. Meanwhile, sceptics see in oracy education a range of pernicious motivations and consequences. Opponents on the left argue that attempts to change how young people speak really mean 'policing' language in ways biased by class and race and distract us from more important economic reforms. Traditionalists feel that oracy is a faddish distraction that gets in the way of imparting actual knowledge in the classroom. All might find some version of their misgivings or hopes expressed in that *Daily Mail* cartoon.

[2] This chapter draws upon the following excellent sources for its history of the oracy movement: Robin Alexander (2019), All Party Parliamentary Group Inquiry Submission, https://robinalexander.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/APPG-Oracy-submissionB.pdf; Valerie Coultas (2015). 'Revisiting debates on oracy: Classroom talk – Moving towards a democratic pedagogy?'. *Changing English*, 22:1, 72–86; Avril Haworth (2001). 'The re-positioning of oracy: A millennium project?'. *Journal of Education*, 31:1, 11–23; Rupert Knight (2024). 'Oracy and cultural capital: The transformative potential of spoken language'. *Literacy*, 58: 37–47.

Despite its growing prominence, 'oracy' is still widely misunderstood. It is often defined too loosely, championed too uncritically, dismissed too rapidly, or discussed without reference to broader cultural or historical factors. The time is therefore ripe for a critical and wide-ranging exploration of the politics of speech education. This book tries to offer this. Its aim is to do for oracy something like what Richard Hoggart's classic work of cultural studies *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) did for our understanding of the politics of everyday reading and writing. To think, in other words, about the uses of oracy. That is, the functions that speaking and listening play, both as a set of practices within the classroom and as ideas fought over in broader society.

This book brings together a range of perspectives on oracy, from both supporters and sceptics. It features observations from leading practitioners, including teachers, trainers and educational researchers. Crucially, it also broadens the debate, bringing in views from prominent anthropologists, historians, linguists and political scientists. For those within education, the book surveys the most up-to-date evidence on how oracy can best be implemented within schools, colleges and communities. For those beyond education, it encourages people with expertise across a range of professions or fields to see that they too have valuable things to say about oracy. Policymakers and educators will develop the best versions of speaking and listening reforms only through thinking as carefully as possible about the full range of implications and perspectives. The essays in this book hope to help enable this.

I.1 The UK as Case Study

As will be clear, this book focuses on how ideas about speaking and listening have played out in contemporary Britain. However, those English researchers who proposed the idea of oracy in the 1960s knew that it was really nothing new. The idea that how we talk deserves special attention in training the young is a universal human impulse. As a pedagogy it has a deep and international history. In the ancient world, we can look back to the emphasis on interpersonal oral fluency in Confucian teaching in China; to the Socratic teaching methods of Classical Athens; or to the rhetorical ideas of Cicero in imperial Rome (Holmes-Henderson *et al.,* 2022). In the modern period, we can trace a direct link back to French Enlightenment thought through Jean-Jacques Rousseau's encouragement of natural spoken language in his treatise *Emile* (1991 [1762]), or to early twentieth-century Russian constructivist psychology through Lev Vygotsky's (1962 [1932]) ideas about child-centred learning.[3] As the anthropologist Karin Barber makes clear in Chapter 8 in this book,

[3] Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1991). *Emile, Or on Education* trans. Peter Constantine (1762). London: Penguin; for the Classical precursors to oracy seeA. Holmes-Henderson, J. Žmavc

despite the high value placed internationally on literacy, speaking and listening have long been vibrant creative domains in societies throughout the Global South. In other words, oracy is merely an inheritor of long-standing global traditions.

Moreover, oral communication is returning in many state education systems throughout the world. Recent comparative studies have shown how speaking and listening is particularly prominent in Arabic-language state education in Lebanon, and in the Malaysian system (ESU, 2017). In Denmark, teaching is often structured around oral competencies from an early age (Reusch, 2021). In the French education system, oral skills have long been prioritised and assessed at advanced levels, and in 2020 a *grand oral* speaking assessment was introduced into the Baccalaureate (Dodet and Mencacci, 2024). In the English-speaking world, Australia has become a prominent location for experiments in 'oracy' (Oracy Australia, 2024), while, as Harriet Piercy explores in Chapter 9 in this book, the United States' public school system's well-known emphasis on debating is now bolstered by Common Core Standards, which prioritise speaking and listening. Oracy education is approached differently across the globe, influenced by diverse cultural, linguistic and educational traditions.

Building on research into these other contexts, this book offers up the UK as an instructive case study for future policy. First, because of the notably capacious body of research into speaking and listening education that has taken this country as its focus. Second, because this context offers a useful five-decades long narrative of fitful stop–start implementation of policies, curricula and frameworks. The UK therefore offers readers from across the world a useful reference point for strategies and methods. It also offers an instructive case study for how attempts to reform speech education become inescapably embroiled in cultural and political controversies. The hope is that readers from across the world will learn from the debate that has played out in the UK. In order to begin to understand this debate, we need to return to the coining of the term and nail down some key definitions. What do we talk about when we talk about 'oracy'?

I.2 Defining 'Oracy'

Everyone agrees on one thing: 'oracy' is an inelegant term. When it was first spoken in the British House of Commons in 1984, Education Secretary Keith Joseph apologised for using 'such a horrible noun' as 'articulateness' in a debate, before admitting that 'the alternative, *oracy*, is even nastier'. Two

and A.-G. Kaldahl (2022). 'Rhetoric, oracy and citizenship: Curricular innovations from Scotland, Slovenia and Norway'. *Literacy*, 56: 253–63. https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.12299.

decades later when it drifted into public consciousness, reaction was similar. The *Financial Times* memorably noted that 'the dreadfully-named *oracy* . . . has the whiff of the dentist's chair' (Kellaway, 2023). Even its champions at organisations such as the educational charity Voice 21 call it 'an ugly word' (Gaunt and Stott, 2019, p.5).

Beyond this there is often surprisingly little agreement. The growing number of people who promote or critique the term are sometimes talking at cross purposes, often using the word to mean quite different things. Pinning down these definitions matters because this pedagogy could be taken in radically different directions depending on which version or oracy education people subscribe to. Those interested in a detailed history of how oracy has developed as an idea in the UK should turn to Alan Howe's Chapter 11 in this book, where he takes us through various phases of attempts to raise the profile of spoken language in UK schools. But here I want to turn to the origins of oracy in the 1960s to consider in turn the five main ways that the word is used: i) oracy as ability, ii) oracy as an educational process, iii) oracy as content, iv) oracy as effective speech, and finally, v) oracy as accurate speech.

The first definition was that offered by the concept's creator, the University of Birmingham educational researcher Andrew Wilkinson (1965a) who coined it to describe 'the ability to use the oral skills of speaking and listening'. Lamenting how 'the spoken language in England has been shamefully neglected', he aimed to make it of equal importance to reading and writing (Wilkinson, 1965a, p.39). It was, he argued a few years later, 'indicative of the unimportant part played by the "orate" skills in thinking about education in the past that no such term existed' (Wilkinson, 1968, p.743). In a sense this was not quite true. On an academic level, there was *orality*, a term used by linguists for the quality of spoken communication; by historians for human eras before writing; and by anthropologists for societies less reliant on literacy (Ong, 1982). On the popular level, a variety of English words captured something similar, most obviously *articulacy* or *eloquence.* Yet as Robin Alexander (2012) has observed, these terms had 'become devalued by casual use'.

Wilkinson's coinage was therefore important in naming a dual ability. Just as *literacy* described individuals skilled in both reading and writing, those with strong oracy were skilled listeners as well as speakers.[4] This made the point that oracy is as much about negotiation and effective listening as it was about public speaking or *oratory*. Moreover, it was important in policy terms because oral abilities had been sidelined in the British curriculum at least since the Newcastle Report (1861) had explicitly prioritised reading, writing and

[4] Even the word 'literacy' itself was less than a century old, having been coined in the 1880s. 'It is not illiteracy I want to prevent, but literacy', *Atlantic Monthly*, no. 722, 1880.

arithmetic – the 'three Rs'. By giving this dual capacity a name, Wilkinson pointed to a gap that needed to be addressed. In the decades since, practitioners have come to varying conclusions on the obvious question that follows: if *oracy* is an ability, how could can it be imparted to others? There are two answers: either make speaking the process through which schools teach a whole range of subjects or make speaking skills the dedicated object of study.

The dominant answer in the oracy movement is that speaking and listening is 'not a subject but a condition of learning in all subjects' (Wilkinson, 1970). As another of oracy's early advocates Douglas Barnes (1976) memorably put it, 'learning floats on a sea of talk', arguing that 'what is needed is not a new mini-subject ... but a changed pattern of teaching across the curriculum' (Barnes, 1976). This notion of *oracy as an educational process* has been the most widely held definition used by key figures within the oracy movement in their theoretical and classroom work. As Howe recalls in Chapter 11 of this book, this was the emphasis of the pioneering National Oracy Project that he helped to lead during the 1970s and 80s (Johnson, 2020; Norman, 1992). As mentioned above, there were multiple global traditions on which they could draw. But purely from the Anglophone world, various competing ideas about talk as an educational process developed in tandem. In the United States, the idea of 'accountable talk' has been proposed by researchers such as Lauren Resnick (see for example Michaels *et al*., 2008). In the UK, the idea of 'dialogic education' has been explored by Robin Alexander and many others (2012, 2020), specifically emphasising the developmental aspects of interactive classroom dynamics. However, perhaps the most influential work on oracy has been that of Neil Mercer, whose Chapter 6 in this book restates the compact dual definition he has put forward since the 1990s: that oracy means 'learning to talk and learning through talk'.[5]

As Mercer's phrase suggests, a second answer to how oracy should be taught has always lurked in the background. 'Learning to talk' implies that speaking and listening were a specific body of skills, techniques or competences that need to be directly taught. This links back to far older traditions of thinking about oral communication, from Classical or Renaissance rhetoric on the one hand, and elocution on the other, with their shared focus on handling of voice, tone and language. Many researchers have been resistant to see oracy in this way. Nonetheless, advocates for oracy education have often realised that it was strategic to offer policymakers a concrete vision of oracy education that was tangible and amenable to assessment. After all, critics of oracy within the

[5] For the best overview of Mercer's work see Neil Mercer, *Language and the Joint Creation of Meaning: The Selected Works of Neil Mercer*. Oxford: Routledge, 2019.

UK government have repeatedly dismissed these ideas as 'idle chatter' in classrooms.[6]

By way of countering this objection, Mercer's research unit at the University of Cambridge and the oracy charity Voice 21 developed the Oracy Skills Framework (2019), a taxonomy of the 'various skills young people need to develop to deal with a range of different talk situations' that broke oracy down into physical, linguistic, cognitive and social and emotional strands, each comprising a number of sub-skills. (Mercer *et al*., 2017; Mercer and Mannion, 2018). Similarly, the English Speaking Union (ESU, 2024) charity defined oracy in terms of four key 'skillsets: reasoning and evidence; listening and response; expression and delivery and organisation and prioritisation'. Equipped with these resources, it is quite possible to approach oracy as something that can be taught directly. In 2024, an Oracy Education Commission was formed and, following six months of wide consultation, went with a definition of 'articulating ideas, developing understanding and engaging with others through speaking, listening and communication'. The report advised that oracy education must involve three things: learning to talk; learning through talk; and learning about talk. Fifty years of sharpening has clearly increased the value of the term. However, some innate problems still dog the enterprise.

I.3 Does Oracy Mean Speaking 'Correctly'?

The distinction between oracy as process and oracy as content might seem an esoteric quarrel within progressive education. It is when people try to define oracy in terms that add value judgements that it becomes a far more contentious and political matter. One of the most common definitions is the definition of *oracy as effective speech*. This is explicitly the case in Cambridge Assessment's (2024) guidelines on oracy as 'using spoken language to communicate effectively'. It is also there in the All Party Parliamentary Group for Oracy's *Speak for Change Report* (Oracy APPG, 2021) in slightly different phrasing, defining oracy as 'the ability to speak eloquently, to articulate ideas and thoughts, to influence through talking, to collaborate with peers and to express views confidently and appropriately'.[7] As the linguist Deborah Cameron explores in Chapter 13 of this book, adverbs or adjectives – terms such as 'confident', 'eloquently' and notions of what is 'appropriate' – are highly subjective,

[6] Michael Gove quoted in Robin Alexander, 'Evidence, Policy and the Reform of Primary Education: A Cautionary Tale', The 2014 Godfrey Thompson Trust Lecture, The University of Edinburgh, 13 May 2014. https://cprtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Alexander-Edinburgh-140513.pdf (accessed 4 April 2024).

[7] All Party Parliamentary Group of Oracy (April 2021). *Speak for Change Inquiry*.

varying wildly from scenario to scenario. Different forms of 'oracy' are clearly required in a discussion with friends, a job interview, a police stop-and-search encounter or a formal school presentation. Who gets to judge what is 'effective' in any of these contexts? These fuzzier definitions rely on a vague sense of function and should therefore be treated cautiously. But they are hardly unique to explanations of oracy. As Mercer points out in Chapter 6, the same might be said of working definitions of 'literacy', which also routinely involve hazily interpretive adjectives or adverbs.

However, it is the final definition that is the most controversial: that of *oracy as correct speech*. Correctness was not part of Wilkinson's (1965a) original definition, nor is it advocated by the vast majority of oracy's champions today. Nonetheless, it seems that this is what many people beyond education think of when they hear the word oracy. When the British Labour Party announced its commitment to oracy in 2023, even receptive centre-left publications heard it as meaning 'the ability to speak well in grammatically correct sentences'.[8] Supporters of oracy education would say that this is a misreading of their aims. Oracy, they maintain, does not amount to the policing of others' language that Cameron (1995; 2000) has termed 'verbal hygiene'. As Alastair Campbell says in his foreword to this book, this kind of education is not about 'speaking the King's English'.

If this is a misunderstanding, however, it is not helped by the fact that the flagship dictionary published by the university press that published this book continues to define oracy in this way: as 'the ability to speak clearly and grammatically correctly' (Cambridge Dictionary of English, 2024). In Chapter 6, Mercer declares himself 'embarrassed' that such a misleading definition 'can be found in a dictionary linked to my university'. Nor is it helped by the fact that when a previous Labour government first brought oracy to national attention in the early 2000s, David Blunkett, the secretary of state for education, allowed it to be understood as meaning that school children ought to be taught 'how to speak properly' (Henry, 2004).

As this survey suggests, it is not ideal that a single word is being made to do so much work (see Knight, 2024). Of course, any compelling idea evolves over time. 'Oracy' does not mean the same thing as it did in the 1960s. This book takes a detached view editorially and does not endorse a specific definition. Instead, it provides a forum in which organisations and individuals can state their vision for the future of oracy education in clear fashion. Nonetheless, the current state of play is best summarised in the definition currently offered by the organisation Voice 21: 'oracy is the ability to articulate ideas, develop understanding and engage with others through spoken

[8] 'How Starmer will rethink education', *New Statesman*, 6 July 2023. See also 'John Humphrys: Oracy is the answer to a pupil's prayer?', *YouGov,* 7 July 2023.

language' (Voice 21, 2019). There is no way of removing subjective judgements entirely from discussions of speaking. But this definition takes pains to shake itself free from some of the more limiting definitions. It is the task of those invested in this idea to ensure that nuanced definitions like this win out over popular simplifications, leaving little room for the misunderstanding of their valuable work.

I.4 What Is Oracy Education Trying to Remedy?

The task is made more challenging by the fact that there are always two competing attempts to define oracy at work at any one time. There is the debate within schools and university faculties of education summarised above. Then there is the broader and far more influential cultural debate about whose voices matter in society – one that takes place as much on social media or in the cartoon pages of tabloid newspapers as it does in books like this. This public debate has inevitably set the terms by which oracy education is understood. It is therefore worth thinking briefly about one such media narrative, and its relationship to how oracy educators have promoted their ideas.

A good way of understanding any idea is to think about the gap it intends to fill or the problem it seeks to remedy. In the case of oracy education, this might seem simple. Everyone who has argued for the need for more talk in state education has used it as a way of pushing back against the notion of 'the Three Rs' and the exclusive focus on non-oral education in curricula and education policy. However, oracy education also opposes something deeper on a cultural and social level. One recurring claim is that it redresses the notion of spoken 'inarticulacy', imagined as an individual and group problem.

This is one way that oracy's early advocates framed its value. In 1965 Wilkinson wrote of how the 'ability to direct rather than to be directed by experience, his ability to establish human relationships, are intimately related to his capacity for language; the frustrations of the inarticulate go deep' (Wilkinson, 1965a). On one level, his phrasing simply picked up on the language of previous educational reformers. The Newbolt Report (Newbolt, 1921, p.59) into the teaching of English had noted that 'some children leave school almost inarticulate so far as anything like educated English is concerned'. The Newsom Report (Newsom, 1963, p.118) noted that 'many boys and girls may well appear to be much more stupid than they need be simply because of the inarticulate homes from which they come'. In August 1964, the UK's General Inspector of English complained of an 'inarticulate speech cult' among the young, warning that 'it is on the bulk of the population, not only on the elite that our lives depended, but our spoken language is increasingly debased' (*Daily Telegraph*, 1964).

This framing of oracy education also tied it to a broader public debate about the supposed failures of working-class speakers. As I point out in Chapter 10 in this book, the origins of the word 'inarticulate' in fact lie in class conflict. It was coined in the 1830s by the Scottish conservative philosopher and historian Thomas Carlyle to dismiss the arguments of Victorian working-class political activists. Ever since, commentators have used the supposedly poor speaking skills of non-elites to question their political legitimacy. Moral panics about frustrated 'inarticulate' youth have remained an evergreen media topic. This was true in the mid-1960s moment when Wilkinson first wrote about oracy, when newspapers worried about the influx of new voters into the electorate, fixating on supposedly 'inarticulate' role models such as the Scottish pop-star Lulu (*Daily Mirror*, 1964). It was true two decades later when the then-Prince Charles began what would become a lifelong crusade against the 'over-riding social problem', of declining speaking skills in the young, arguing that English was taught 'bloody badly' in state schools (*The Times*, 1987). And it was particularly true in the early 2000s era of the cartoon with which I began, an age in which the 'inarticulate' working class became a stock target of British television satire, most notoriously in the figure of Vicky Pollard in the sitcom 'Little Britain', whose habits of speech became a byword for social decline, invoked repeatedly in Parliamentary debates.

This media meta-narrative has posed a problem for advocates of oracy education. On the one hand it makes their job easier since it underpins the case for their social aims. On the other, it perpetuates stereotypes that undermine oracy's apparent egalitarian goals. Some have at times been overly willing to play up to this narrative. Though founded in empathy and a desire to improve life chances through child-centred learning, Barnes and Wilkinson's version of oracy education arguably relied upon what might be called 'deficit' thinking, defining the frustrations of the young in terms of their perceived lack of language. The social science has moved on significantly since this period, as the various pieces in this book confirm. As the linguist Ian Cushing argues in his chapter to this book, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge the residual influence of this deficit thinking, to prevent future forms of oracy education perpetuating class and racial biases.

However, in the decades since, oracy's advocates have moved away from this way of framing the purpose of speech education. The keynote now is that oracy can remedy barriers to social mobility or self-realisation. To key figures such as Peter Hyman, Voice 21 founder and Labour adviser, oracy is about allowing young people to find their voice: 'too often young people are denied the opportunity to learn how to articulate their ideas effectively and gain the confidence to find their voice – opportunities consistently afforded to more advantaged students'. Others such as Holmes-Henderson and her team in Chapter 4 limit themselves to the notion that oracy aids 'academic outcomes'