# Oracy

Oracy – or 'speaking and listening skills' – has become one of the most prominent ideas in modern education. But where has this idea come from? Should oracy education be seen as positive, or does it hold unintended consequences? How can problems over definitions, teaching and assessment ever be overcome?

This timely book brings together prominent practitioners and researchers to explore the often overlooked implications of speaking and listening education. It features essays from teachers, school leaders, political advisers and charity heads, and from leading thinkers across the fields of linguistics, political science, history, Classics and anthropology.

Together, they consider the benefits and risks of oracy education, place it in global context, and offer practical guidance for those trying to implement it on the ground. By demystifying one of the most important yet contentious ideas in modern education, this book offers a vital roadmap for how schools can make oracy work for all.

TOM F. WRIGHT is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of English at the University of Sussex in the UK. He is the author of *Lecturing the Atlantic* (2017) and the textbook *Transatlantic Rhetoric* (2020). His writing has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Bloomberg*, the *Times Literary Supplement* and *TES*, and he appears regularly on BBC Radio 4.

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## *The Politics of Speech Education*

*Edited by*
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# Foreword: The Oracy That Democracy Needs

We are in so many ways what we say, and how we say it. Yet, while we all immediately know what literacy and numeracy are, oracy has yet to achieve the same status with the public or, bar a few good exceptions, policymakers.

In the modern age we have to be able to teach our children to communicate clearly. If we are serious about equality in society, then ensuring all children know how to use their voice in all situations where a voice is required is something we need to address. We need to ensure all young people have a voice. We need to put how we teach listening and speaking on the same par as literacy and numeracy.

Learning how to stand up and speak to an audience can be nerve-wracking. Glossophobia – the fear of speaking in public – is up there with snakes and spiders as a fear. Conquer those nerves and it is great for confidence. But oracy doesn't mean public speaking as in standing up and making speeches. It is about public speaking when you're dealing with bureaucracy. When you're trying to get something done over the phone. When you're negotiating with your landlord. When you're in a stop and search situation. When you're trying to deal with people when you open a bank account. And it's not just about confidence but about empathy, which comes from learning to understand other people's positions and enter their mindset.

It also doesn't mean young people all need to sound like the King's English. We shouldn't get obsessed with standardised English. There's no such thing. Oracy isn't about getting people to talk the same way. Being proud of your accent or where you are from is not inconsistent with speaking effectively. It just means giving people the space and confidence to say what they have to say as effectively as possible.

How do we achieve this? We need to start with teaching people how to speak in state schools. Here in the United Kingdom, oracy is coming to the top of the agenda. It was good to see the Labour Party commit to oracy as one of its core education policies.

In both Scotland and Wales, they have got the message that oracy is good not just for confidence and well-being, but for deeper thinking in the classroom. The Scottish education system defines oracy as 'listening and

talking' – pretty simple – and in theory at least it stands on a par with reading and writing. Likewise, the Welsh government has embraced oracy across the curriculum.

In England, meanwhile, Tory education ministers have long dismissed oracy as 'sitting around chatting'. As with so much the Conservative government did, they talked the talk about removing the barriers that hold people back, but in their deeds, they kept those barriers high, lest power, wealth and opportunity slip from the few to the many.

I spoke recently at a conference of teachers, where Professor Neil Mercer from the University of Cambridge gave a presentation. He asked for a show of hands among the several hundred teachers present – who had been taught speaking skills at school? A relatively small number of hands went up. He asked them to lower their hands if they had gone to private schools. The hands left in the air could now be counted on a couple of fingers.

State schools need to give everyone from all backgrounds access to these skills. It doesn't solve everything, of course not. But it is an important start.

This would help broaden the gene pool of politics too. One of the messages of my recent book *But What Can I Do?* is that we need to broaden the political gene pool, and that means developing the confidence of the 93 per cent who attend state schools, so that it at least matches the confidence of those in the top private schools, who are taught to believe that to rule is their right.

Remember: Eton College has produced three times as many prime ministers as the Labour Party in its entire history. Eton's most recent prime minister would have struggled to get a job managing a bus depot, let alone running a country with a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, had he not been born into privilege, then taught supreme self-confidence at school and in university.

The people in this book are trying to work out how to bring the best parts of oracy education to those of all backgrounds. Their chapters show just how fascinating and rich the issue of speaking and listening is.

It won't be easy, and people won't all agree on what needs to be done. But we can all agree that society, politics and most of all young people need effective, confident, authentic communication more than ever.

ALASTAIR CAMPBELL

# Acknowledgements

This book emerges from a chance encounter with a fascinating idea. Unlike many of the contributors to this book, I do not work in schools. Instead, I teach history and literature at the university level. But when giving talks in schools, speaking to teacher friends or reading the educational press, I kept on hearing about an intriguing idea. Quite soon, I became fascinated with the rich and contentious debate that was taking place within education over speaking and listening. In part, this was because from my study of history, I realised that the kinds of debates over oracy education today had important echoes in the past. I grew convinced that a range of other people beyond education would also have something to say about this important and still somewhat unknown and misunderstood concept.

This insight led me to start a project called Speaking Citizens, based at the University of Sussex, that has been generously supported by two grants from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. It allowed me to work alongside fantastic researcher colleagues from across the UK: Hester Barron, Stephen Coleman, Stuart Dunmore, Arlene Holmes-Henderson, Cassandra Kill, Anna Liddle and many more.

We have been trying to broaden the conversation around oracy by organising events and seminars, and a major conference in 2022. This book is one culmination of this work and is offered as a way of celebrating the vitality and sophistication of ideas that buzz around the concept of oracy.

It has accrued many debts of thanks. Above all, Rebecca Taylor of Cambridge University Press for taking a chance on this volume, and to her colleague Isabel Collins for seeing this through to publication, and to the anonymous readers for their useful feedback.

It has also benefitted from the intellectual input of a wide range of people who are not found in its pages, including Lord David Blunkett, Jennifer Richards, Bob Eaglestone, Rupert Wegerif, Robin Alexander, Beccy Earnshaw, Rupert Higham, Lynne Murphy, Andrew Hadfield, James Mannion and many others.

As is made clear in the introduction, though the focus of this book is primarily on the British context, all our contributors owe a great deal to the

exciting work also taking place overseas, in the EU, North America and beyond. The intellectual debt to global scholarship is evident and reflected in the works cited in each chapter.

It is a book created in awe of all the teachers who – beyond healthy disagreements over methods and means – have selflessly devoted their lives to the goal of nurturing the rising generations. As the son of two schoolteachers, I can think of no more noble calling.

Finally, it is dedicated to the loud voices of Daniel and Theo, and to Elf, the most skilled listener of all.