

Embedding an Oracy Culture

'I believe it's essential that we as educators prioritise Oracy as part of our curriculum.' – Teacher at Prince Albert Primary School

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This article explores how Prince Albert Primary School has infused oracy skills into the broader curriculum. Teachers employ innovative instructional approaches, such as talk-based inquiry, sentence stems, and collaborative projects to foster regular opportunities for student engagement and dialogue. Drawing on research-based strategies, the school has established dedicated oracy lessons, designed to build foundational communication skills from the Early Years.

Defining Oracy

Oracy refers to the development of children's language skills to communicate across a range of social settings.

Developing oral proficiency can result in many benefits including improving engagement and outcomes for children with Special Educational Needs (The Communication Trust 2013), potentially addressing social disadvantage (Roulstone et al. 2011) and increased communication skills for children who speak English as an additional language (Grundy and Timmer 2016).

Inspiration and Rationale

My own interest in this topic can be traced through my experience working as an Oracy Subject Leader in a primary school where oracy education is most critical. Prince Albert Primary School is a school that is largely made up of children who speak English as an additional language. It ranges from those who are just beginning to acquire English to those who are fluent in both their mother tongue and English. Many of the children come from families where both parents speak little or no English, which means that the only time these children are exposed to English is at school.

In addition, the proportion of children eligible for free school meals is higher than the national average and many children enter school with significantly lower spoken language development than their more advantaged peers. Therefore, school may be the only opportunity for some children to have a rich English language experience. Moreover, the effects of the pandemic and resultant school closures have reduced the opportunities for children to develop their oracy skills. The national picture suggests that many schools experience similar challenges to developing an oracy culture within the school.

To combat some of the educational challenges faced by the community, oracy was incorporated into each year group's timetable as a stand-alone subject at Prince Albert Primary School and we were encouraged to embed oracy opportunities across the curriculum. Following the implementation of our oracy curriculum, I witnessed first-hand the potential that oracy has as an instrument of

learning. For instance, I noticed that children who used to be terrified at the prospect of presenting to the class, were now volunteering for their group to present first. Through the explicit teaching of oracy, we were providing opportunities for shy or under-confident children to overcome their anxiety.

Furthermore, I observed how oracy lessons had accelerated non-English speaking children's language development, which increased their ability to engage in learning. The impact that explicit oracy teaching had had on these children was undeniable, and I wondered why it hadn't been introduced into schools sooner.

Oracy's Place in Policy

The National Curriculum in England states that pupils in Key Stages 1 and 2 should develop skills in 'spoken language' as part of their English lessons and aims to ensure all pupils are competent in the arts of speaking and listening. Despite the momentum oracy has gained in policy over the past decade, its value is still not fully recognised in our education system. Voice 21 (www.voice.21.org), the UK's oracy education charity, welcomed the recognition of the importance of language development in the early years in the School's White Paper 'Opportunity for All' (2022). However, it states that to give all young people the best possible chances of success in life, the focus on communication and language is crucial at all ages, not just the early years.

There is a lack of literature addressing the problematic relationship between oracy and literacy. Although research supports the view that talk enhances learning in all areas of the curriculum, the guidance on spoken language exists within the confines of the English curriculum. Oracy should not be siloed within English alone, as this can lead to the depreciation of its value in other subjects. A likely repercussion is that there is a focus on literacy at the expense of oracy. Linking oral language with literacy-based outcomes perpetuates the assumption that spoken language is a skill that doesn't require teaching and a general assumption that oracy skills occur 'naturally' and without the need to be explicitly taught. Learning of academic content often takes priority over high quality classroom talk and teachers may be reluctant to devote time to oracy because they feel obliged to focus on what is required and tested.

Nonetheless, a comforting prospect is that I am yet to encounter a teacher that does not place high value on the importance of developing oracy skills for their students. However, the lack of prominence afforded to oracy across educational policy has meant that theoretical acceptance is not always mirrored in practice.

How we established an oracy culture in school

At Prince Albert Primary School, we conducted staff surveys and interviews, asking staff to share feedback on levels of student oracy and how they could be supported to develop an oracy culture in their classrooms. From this data, we could easily identify clear priorities to be addressed through our strategy. A common concern was that oral participation in the classroom may lead to the discomfort of shy or under-confident children. It had been noted that children who had low levels of self-confidence tended to under-perform in oral tasks. The concerns raised highlighted the pressing need to establish a whole-school oracy culture, which offered support on how to facilitate and manage opportunities for shy children to develop oral competency (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Whole school discussion guidelines

Through training, we considered the perspective of oracy having the potential to provide under-confident children with opportunities to overcome their anxiety, rather than succumb to it. Following this, teachers were able to talk about a range of methods they had utilised in their endeavour to support introverted children. Most notably, teachers worked diligently to promote a culture of safety and trust within the classroom. This was achieved through the frequent use of talk-based inquiries, where children were given opportunities to share ideas and formulate responses collaboratively. To remove pressure from individual responses, children fed back to teachers using 'my group said' rather than 'I said'. Sentence stems were also provided to help the children to structure their ideas and reinforce key learning details (Figure 2). A culture of safety without fear of failure, combined with lots of positive

praise, allowed shy children to find their voice and push through hard emotions. Teachers shared success stories of children who used to refuse to speak publicly but were now volunteering to speak first.

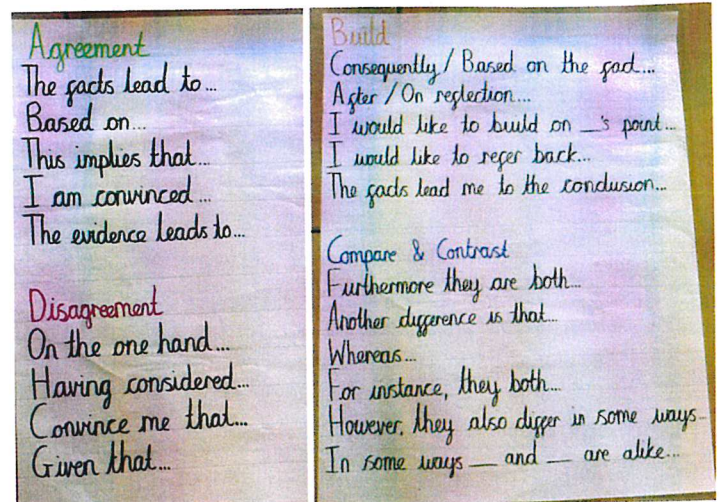


Figure 2: Examples of sentence stems

The general impression gained from the staff surveys and interviews was that many teachers felt as though they would benefit from receiving more time dedicated specifically to oracy lessons. We acknowledged that the lack of prominence afforded to oracy across educational policy may have disincentivised teachers from giving it the time they felt it deserved. An identified pitfall was the fact that oracy was not formally assessed, which reduced its stature, leading to the prioritisation of other formally assessed subjects.

In the interest of dismantling this barrier to our oracy culture, we introduced protected time on each year group's timetable dedicated to the explicit teaching of oracy. These lessons were designed to build foundational communication skills in the Early Years, which then gradually progress to incorporate more complex oracy practices, including debates, presentations, and group discussions. Although we firmly uphold that oracy is a cross-curricular responsibility, we wanted to provide teachers and pupils with the time and space to develop oracy skills, rather than expect the children to acquire the skills during other lessons. The rationale behind this decision was to give oracy an identity in school. By investing time into the explicit teaching of oracy, the skills are embedded into the children's long-term memory and are used with automaticity.

Subject leaders also played a crucial role in developing our oracy culture by coherently planning vocabulary alongside the curriculum. In our school, subject specific vocabulary is explicitly taught so that the children can absorb it into their own lexicon. Our aim is to hear children speaking like a specialist in different areas of the curriculum. To enhance our curriculum further, teachers were given dedicated time to return to existing lesson plans and adapt these with oracy in mind. These sessions especially focused on the use of Oracy in Maths, Science and non-core subjects thus demonstrating an awareness of the limitations associated with siloing oracy within the confines of literacy lessons.

In science, for example, enquiry-based questions were introduced to frame a half-term's learning so that the children could engage in discussions about the ways in which they might answer them or go about finding answers. In maths, there was a focus on developing high-quality oral explanations for the processes they were performing rather than simply completing calculations. Overall, developing an oracy culture across the curriculum allowed subject leaders to better meet their own curricular aims (Figure 3).

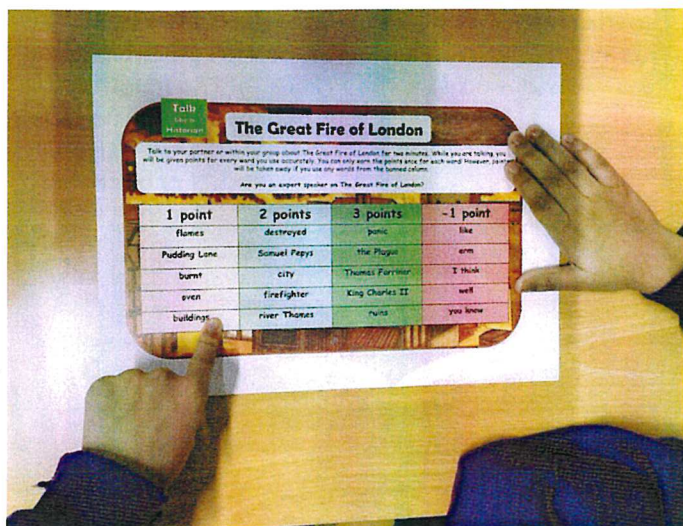


Figure 3: Focussing on key vocabulary in history

Some concluding remarks

There are some caveats worth noting. The first relates to uncertainty regarding the assessment of oracy. As oracy is not formally assessed, priority is sometimes given to other formally assessed subjects. Other issues, such as difficulty in assessing individual performance, have also been raised. As conversations can require participation from multiple people, it is difficult to assess individual performance and ensure that there is equal participation. To tackle this, teachers would benefit from additional training and practical solutions on how to effectively assess oracy.

Attention is also being directed towards supporting staff with planning for oracy, with a particular focus on any teacher who is new to the school and whose oracy skills set is less developed. They may have been more accustomed to delivering a curriculum that was biased towards developing writing skills. There is also a risk of cognitively overloading staff if caution is not taken when launching various aspects of a strategy within quick succession of each other. With so many competing demands on a classroom teacher's time, this can damage the long-term aim of embedding an oracy whole-school culture.

Finally, the initial enthusiasm towards oracy may be in jeopardy if the momentum is not kept up. Therefore, it is important to continue to interact with current research and hold high-profile events to return oracy to the spotlight.

Next Steps

As Prince Albert Primary School continues its oracy journey, several key next steps are envisioned to further strengthen

the integration of oracy across the curriculum. First and foremost, more training sessions are set to take place, which focus on oracy assessment. This will involve giving teachers dedicated time to familiarise themselves with the oracy progression document and then collaboratively explore formative assessment strategies. We would like to expand this training so that it is available across the multi-academy trust.

To ensure a student-centred approach, Prince Albert School recognises the importance of involving children in the assessment of oracy. We will be increasing engagement in assessment by implementing 'talk detectives' in each class. This will involve familiarising the children with an age-friendly criteria based on the four strands of oracy (physical, linguistic, cognitive and social and emotional). The chosen talk detectives will then have the responsibility of assessing and supporting other children in the class based on these criteria.

We have plans to raise the status of oracy with parents and carers through teacher-led oracy workshops. There will be opportunities for children to showcase their learning within these workshops and for parents or carers to learn how to support their children with their oracy skills at home. At the end of these workshops, parents will be equipped with oracy activity ideas and question prompts to stimulate discussion at home. By involving parents as partners, the school aims to create a unified and cohesive learning environment that nurtures oracy skills both within and outside the school setting.

These next steps reflect Prince Albert Primary School's commitment to continuous improvement and the ongoing development of oracy skills among its students. By providing additional training for teachers, involving students in the assessment process, and engaging parents as valuable stakeholders, the school aims to further strengthen its oracy programme and equip students with the essential communication skills needed for success in an increasingly interconnected world.

References

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