

Spoken language as oracy: acquiescence or agency?

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Spoken language is seeing a resurgence of interest in compulsory schooling, often under the banner of 'oracy'. Originally defined as 'general ability in the oral skills' (Wilkinson, 1965: 14), oracy is open to various interpretations which can include deficit-based interests in correctness and conformity or empowering interests in voice and agency. Despite common ground between Higher Education (HE) and compulsory education in terms of spoken language norms and initiatives, oracy is a little-known concept in HE. The limited oracy research suggests a narrow understanding of talk as a competence and a need to develop oracy as part of wider academic literacy (e.g. Heron et al. 2023).

Our study considers the benefits of an explicit focus on oracy research and practice in HE with an emphasis on questions of agency and authentic forms of participation: opportunities for constructive dialogue, collective meaning-making and the valuing of diverse forms of contribution (Knight, 2023).

Full paper

[Introduction: arguments for oracy](#)

Spoken language is seeing a resurgence of interest in the compulsory phases of education (Holmes-Henderson & Wright, 2023), often under the banner of 'oracy' (Voice 21, 2022). Originally defined simply as 'general ability in the oral skills' (Wilkinson, 1965: 14), oracy is open to various interpretations, and oracy initiatives may consequently have diverse political impacts.

Oracy in a holistic sense is a potentially useful concept bringing together, and raising the status of, talk as a means of communication with talk as a tool for learning (Norman, 1992). From this perspective, evidence-informed arguments for giving oracy explicit attention in education include the importance of communication skills for a host of academic and personal outcomes (Asmussen, 2018), the cognitive benefits for attainment of specific forms of talk-based pedagogy (Alexander, 2020) and the opportunity for agency through voice and participation in one's own education (Lefstein & Snell, 2014). Nevertheless, narrower conceptions of oracy often place an emphasis on eloquence and fundamental skills in ways which can reinforce normative patterns and existing inequities. The instrumentalist prioritisation of talk as a skillset has been criticised for assuming a deficit view of many learners' linguistic backgrounds and, by extension, for perpetuating arbitrary norms associated with the powerful (Cushing, 2024).

This study: a work-in-progress

This study is an attempt to consider the potential benefits of an explicit focus on oracy research and practice in HE. It particularly emphasises questions of agency and authentic forms of participation: authenticity understood here as opportunities for constructive dialogue, collective meaning-making and the valuing of diverse forms of contribution (Knight, 2023). Despite common ground between HE and compulsory education in terms of spoken language norms and initiatives and overlaps such as those with language teaching and dialogic pedagogies, oracy itself is a relatively little-explored concept in HE and indeed post-16 environments. The limited research on oracy itself suggests a narrow understanding of talk as an end product and competence (Heron et al. 2023), and a need to develop a metalanguage of talk as part of wider academic literacy (Heron et al. 2021; Baker & Heron, 2023).

A number of factors suggest that an explicit oracy focus might be very timely for HE. Some relate to skills development, such as performance in oral assessment (particularly in response to AI) or the need for a new explicitness about face-to-face interaction post-pandemic. Others concern the changing demographic of the student body in the UK. Both the increase in international students and the widening participation agenda for home students raise the potential, in different ways, for a mismatch between the spoken language expectations and norms of students and those of traditional UK academia (Kim, 2002; Klinger & Murray, 2012).

In this context, a focus on oracy as a response might be viewed in two ways: either, from a deficit viewpoint, to inculcate conformity and acquiescence with academic norms or, alternatively, to open a dialogue about students' assets and how they might be harnessed in service of agency and empowerment. We are interested in exploring the latter stance. We are investigating how practices valuing multiple perspectives and 'exploratory talk' for co-constructing knowledge (Mercer & Littleton, 2007) as part of the HE repertoire might be promoted in culturally inclusive ways to empower students to make a constructive and active contribution in their education and in society beyond.

These aims are reflected in our current research project. Its primary aim is to investigate educators' oracy practices and students' learning experiences in the transitions into, through and beyond HE. We are investigating these questions through a multiple case study (Yin, 2017), centred on two Midlands universities and their local stakeholders, including academic staff, students, sixth form and further education teachers and local employers. The first, exploratory, phase of data collection was based on small focus groups within the World Café approach to discussion (Brown & Isaacs, 2005) and sought to unearth understandings of oracy among the different parties present. The second phase, using semi-structured interviews, is currently underway.

While this project is still ongoing, tentative early lines of enquiry emerging include educators' own confidence with oracy; changing expectations for talk at moments of educational transition; developing students' confidence to participate verbally; differing cultural norms and oracy's potential role in local community building. As we reflect on our preliminary research findings, we invite attendees/participants to consider these issues in more detail: how might we move beyond a focus on talk as compliance and competence and instead foster and promote a more activism-centred conception of oracy?

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