

## **Call for evidence from the Commission on the Future of Oracy Education in England**

### **Submission from the Association of School and College Leaders**

#### **A. Introduction**

1. The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) is a trade union and professional association representing over 25,000 education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business leaders and other senior staff of state-funded and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL members are responsible for the education of more than four million children and young people across primary, secondary, post-16 and specialist education.
2. ASCL welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to this important commission. Our response is based on the views of our members, obtained through discussions at ASCL Council, with relevant advisory groups, including our curriculum and assessment committee, and prompted and unprompted emails and messages.

#### **B. Key points**

3. Oracy is a fundamental skill that should be a common entitlement for all young people, throughout their formal education.
4. We conceptualise oracy in five ways:
  - Early speech and language development
  - Disciplinary oracy – the ability to think and speak in a subject-specific way, which becomes increasingly expert and sophisticated throughout school
  - Taught rhetoric – the explicit teaching of rhetorical devices and public speaking
  - Pedagogic oracy – how speaking and listening can be used to teach and embed knowledge, and assess subject-specific content
  - Extra-curricular oracy – activities that support oracy beyond the formal curriculum, such as debating clubs, school and college plays, student voice activities, Model UN, etc.
5. We think it is unhelpful to think of ‘speaking and listening’ as generic or transferable skills, and would strongly urge against any recommendations for them to be included in the curriculum without being rooted in strong, knowledge-rich subject content.

6. Changes to the national curriculum and to GCSEs have arguably undermined the importance of oracy in the curriculum. Speaking and listening is assessed in GCSE English Language, but carries no weighting. Members tell us this means students don't value it, as it doesn't count towards their grade. In turn, this devalues the importance of speaking and listening within the specification, and more broadly.
7. Speaking is assessed in modern foreign language GCSEs, carrying 25% of the marks awarded, giving it parity with listening, reading and writing.
8. Oracy is valued by schools, but demands on the timetable mean it is not always prioritised. Any recommendations from the commission which propose an addition to the curriculum must also consider what could be removed to accommodate this.
9. The commission must also be mindful of the impact on teacher workload. If oracy is seen as 'another thing to do' or the latest gimmick, then it is unlikely to have a positive impact.
10. Oracy is closely linked to self-identity, and therefore plays an important role in the mental health and wellbeing of young people. The ability to articulate feelings and emotions through words is something we want all young people to feel confident in doing.
11. Oracy is also strongly linked to academic outcomes. The ability to articulate your thinking about a subject or topic is likely to mean that you remember it more, understand it better, and therefore commit it to your long-term memory.
12. There is a divide between the provision that independent schools and state-funded schools can offer. Given the link between oracy and academic outcomes, this may be one of many causes of the widening disadvantage gap in primary and secondary education.
13. The commission must be mindful of the needs of children and young people with SEND, some of whom will have profound speaking and listening difficulties throughout their lives. The commission's recommendations must be inclusive, and consider what a common entitlement looks like for all learners.

### **C. In response to your main questions**

#### **What is your understanding of the links between oracy education and specific subject outcomes?**

14. The link between oracy and specific subject outcomes is clear, and has been evidenced through studies over the past 50 years.
15. Recent meta-studies such as Garcia (2021) bring together much of this literature, and show a statistically significant positive impact between oracy proficiency and academic outcomes, including standardised test scores and overall academic performance.
16. This is most effective when rooted in deep disciplinary subject knowledge. What does it mean to talk like a mathematician? To speak like a scientist? To articulate like a historian?

17. Speaking is thinking, and through speech students can formulate their ideas about a topic and commit it to their long-term memory.

**What is your understanding of the links between oracy and outcomes in career and business?**

18. Dylan Wiliam mapped a survey of what employers are looking for, undertaken by the CBI, against the national curriculum in England, and found that the subject with the most crossover in terms of content was drama (Wiliam, 2016). This demonstrates the very clear link between oracy and employability.
19. Young people will clearly be at a disadvantage at job interviews if they are not confident speakers.
20. The DfE's own employer skills survey (2019) places communication skills as the first priority of UK employers.

**What is your understanding of the links between oracy and mental health?**

21. The ability to speak and articulate how you are feeling is fundamental to mental health and wellbeing.
22. Many members tell us that a young person's inability to explain what they're feeling can lead to an escalation of behavioural issues.
23. Oracy skills, such as active listening and empathy, also play an important part in building relationships with peers, which in turn contributes to a young person's mental health.
24. Oracy is also an expression of identity. Understanding the way we speak, and why we do so, is an important step to understanding ourselves. The current national curriculum and GCSE English specifications focus on the importance of Standard English. While this is clearly important, we think that young people also need to understand how language is used in different contexts, and how this is closely linked to cultural heritage.

**What is your understanding of the links between oracy, advocacy and democracy?**

25. Schools and colleges provide a range of student voice and student leadership initiatives, such as school councils, peer mentoring, student tour guides, mock elections and debating clubs.
26. All of these contribute to a student's ability to articulate and defend a point of view, which is clearly linked to advocacy and democracy.
27. The act of speaking is also thinking. As such, debating an idea or policy is important in a student forming their own views and perspectives.

**What is your understanding of the role of oracy in the context of rapid technological development?**

28. The unprecedented rise of AI means that it is more important than ever that young people have strong oracy skills. Large language models can only predict the next word; they are incapable of independent thought or expression.

29. Rapid technological advancement has transformed the nature of work, with many tasks now being conducted collaboratively in virtual teams. Oracy skills are essential for effective teamwork in digital environments.
30. Oracy is also a skill that allows us to adapt and learn new things. The ability to speak to another individual about a new idea, new skill or new concept will be paramount in an evolving world.

**What role do you think government and schools should play in oracy education?**

31. It is ASCL policy that all state-funded schools should follow a slimmed-down national curriculum. We also think that the published national curriculum should be the sole document that government uses to mandate any curriculum content.
32. As such, any common entitlement to the explicit teaching of oracy should be included in the national curriculum, rather than as separate statutory or non-statutory guidance.
33. While the government has a role in setting the minimum expectation or core entitlement for all young people, schools and colleges should be given space to develop their own approaches to oracy education.
34. As above, as well as the explicit teaching of rhetorical devices and early language and speech development, the pedagogies that teachers use in the classroom can also promote oracy. Examples include using vivas to assess students' understanding, encouraging meaningful and purposeful group work to help access knowledge, and encouraging students to give verbal answers using subject-specific vocabulary.
35. There is an important distinction, then, between what is mandated by government, and how government can support pedagogies which promote oracy.
36. Ultimately, school and college leaders are best placed to design an oracy education that is appropriate for their context, within a core entitlement set by government.

**Please share one policy that you think would improve oracy education in England.**

37. ASCL strongly advocates for the introduction of a new assessment of literacy, which would include oracy. As mentioned above, although speaking and listening are notionally assessed in the current English language GCSE, the fact that the assessment carries no weighting of marks means it is not taken seriously by all students. A new assessment, which included oracy, would allow all young people the dignity of showing what they have achieved during compulsory education.

**D. Conclusion**

38. We thank the commission for this important work, and are pleased to contribute to this initial call for evidence. ASCL is happy to provide additional evidence as the commission continues, including through convening of school and college leaders if helpful.

*Tom Middlehurst  
Curriculum, Assessment and Inspection Specialist  
Association of School and College Leaders  
May 2024*