Pearson

Oracy in English

The conversation so far...

Through our *Let's Talk English* conversations, we've gathered insights from over 800 secondary English teachers, 1000 secondary students, 1000 college students and 1000 college tutors. Alongside this research, we've hosted 10 national forums, taken part in key industry events and brought teachers and school students together through regional events and visits across the country.

In the first of our discussion updates, we look back on the conversations about oracy in English, where voices unite and highlight the topics that require further focus.

This report couldn't be more timely and adds vital insights to the case for urgent change in the way that oracy is valued across the whole education system. The evidence shows that teachers, students and education leaders understand the importance of speaking and listening for confidence, attainment, joy in learning, critical thinking and making your way beyond school, in the world of work and life in general.

The discussions outlined here show how much will there is to create a new 'oracy generation' - able to use their voices to thrive in school, work and life. The embedding of oracy in English and in life in every classroom across subjects is key to the systems change which will create a culture of oracy for every child in every school, every day. Getting it right with oracy in English is central to making this change happen.

There are of course some barriers to oracy education and big questions we need to grapple with and it's important that these are addressed. We need to ensure that oracy supports the education that children need both today and in the future, with all the changes in technology and beyond which are fast upon us. A responsibility rests on all of us to drive those conversations forward and this research will help us do that.

Kate Paradine, CEO. Voice 21

"Speech is something we should celebrate. It gives students the chance to express their thoughts, to feel that what they say is important – that it matters – and know that they are heard."
Secondary English teacher

What we know

From secondary English teachers:
There is a clear need for change in how oracy is valued within schools.

Fewer than 1 in 10 feel that the GCSE English* curriculum builds students' confidence in speaking and listening

"What we really want English to teach is pleasure, confidence and play in language — helping every student to see the value of speaking well, and to speak with joy."
Thomas Karshan, Associate Professor, University of East Anglia

"In English GCSE, what we want them to be able to do is read critically, think creatively and communicate clearly. Being able to present ideas, form an argument, summarise ideas,.. those are things people need to do on a daily basis. Students being able to be elastic and creative in an argument are essential skills....If we took that mantle on of creating really effective, confident communicators, then as educators, we're doing a real service to the future, creating communicators of the future."
Rebecca White, Oriel High School

From students:

- **37%** of secondary students feel that **lessons on how to get a job** (and workplace skills/ interview skills) are **missing from their learning**.
- **35%** say that lessons on **speaking confidently in front of others** are **missing from their learning**.
- **27%** say that lessons on **communication skills and how to interact with others** are **missing from their learning**.

Having recently completed GCSE English, 16–18 year-old college students told us:

- **78%** would prioritise **greater focus on speaking and listening** in redesigning GCSE English.
- **71%** want the option to **respond to exams orally**, not just in writing.
- **Only 36%** say that studying GCSE English equips them with the skills to **clearly express their thoughts and opinions.**
- **Just 34%** say that English builds their **confidence in spoken communication** in situations like conversations or interviews.

Students see oracy as a skill that prepares them for life and work. They recognise that it builds confidence, employability and real-world readiness. They want content that relates to real life and builds transferable, practical communication skills.

From college tutors:

- **78%** of those teaching resit students would prioritise **speaking and listening in GCSE reform**.
- **Only 32%** say resits **prepare students for workplace demands,** including communication.

Tutors consistently link oracy and communication as essential for student success, highlighting its role in employability, workplace readiness and student motivation.

From the education community:

> **"It's important, as employers and parents tell us, that we are teaching young people to go out into the world as confident communicators — to be able to disagree agreeably, to listen critically and actively. That's never mattered more."**
> Geoff Barton, The Oracy Commission

The Oracy Commission has called for oracy to be recognised as the "fourth R", alongside reading, writing and arithmetic. It emphasises that oracy education should encompass learning **to talk, through talk and about talk**.

"Articulating ideas, developing understanding and engaging with others through speaking, listening and communication."
The Oracy Commission, definition of Oracy

At the same time, Ofsted have recently introduced a reference to oracy and the importance of communicating effectively, articulating ideas, developing understanding and engaging with others, in their secondary school inspection toolkit.

What is clear from the conversations to date is a strong consensus on the importance of oracy.

Educators, students and sector leaders highlight its role in shaping confidence, building connections and opening up opportunities for the future.

The shared view is that oracy should be more deeply embedded and valued in GCSE English so its impact is felt in classrooms and young people's everyday lives.

"We're missing such an opportunity to support the basic norms of communication that we assume everyone has. To get a job or speak to a client, you have to be able to communicate and yet they don't understand the importance of having that conversation, because they'll just send them a snap."
Secondary English teacher

What we've learned so far...

Oracy is both an academic and a life skill

> **"Across all subjects, spoken language is fundamental to learning. In science education, for example, oracy allows students to become fluent speakers of science – it's through articulating ideas in talk that they begin to truly think like scientists."**
> Russell Findlay, CEO, Speakers Trust

There is a strong consensus that **spoken language is not an add-on, but a core skill.** It underpins students' ability to grasp and articulate ideas in every subject - deepening their understanding, improving writing and building the reasoning needed for further study. Beyond the classroom, these same skills - the ability to listen, think critically and communicate clearly - are essential for lifelong success in work, relationships and society.

Watch Geoff Barton, The Oracy Commission, explain why helping young people communicate has never been more important.

Oracy is important for identity and agency

> **"We can help by making the importance of speech more obvious to everyone and to show how it can affect people's lives in many ways."**
> Neil Mercer, Professor of Education, University of Cambridge

Alongside its role in confidence and employability, **oracy is about valuing students' own voices and identities**. That includes recognising the richness of English and the ways it's used across different communities and contexts.

Watch Professor Neil Mercer discuss the importance of valuing non-standard English in our short video series.

Oracy grows through meaningful classroom experiences

> **"Before you jump to assessment, think about the experiences you want students to have — and then teach them how to do those things."**
> Alice Stott, Director of Programmes & Engagement, Voice 21

Students and educators support the idea that **oracy must be embedded into daily classroom life**, creating a culture where talk is valued and encouraged. Regular, low-stakes opportunities to practise speaking and listening in meaningful ways were seen as vital for developing confidence, clarity and a sense of enjoyment in learning through talk.

Watch Tom Wright, Head of English at the University of Sussex, shares how pupils speak passionately every day about topics that interest them.

The current system undervalues oracy

> **"To give it proper value, spoken language assessment should be an integral part of the English Language GCSE."**
> Neil Mercer, Professor of Education, University of Cambridge

Central to our discussions has been the belief that '*that which is not measured, is not valued*'. There is agreement that **the current spoken language endorsement illustrates the problem**: students deliver a presentation that is graded separately, but it does not contribute to their overall grade. This has left educators, leaders, parents and students questioning its value. By carrying no credit, it signals that oracy has lesser weight than written communication within English. The challenge now is how to move towards a model of assessment that restores this value.

"We're not putting that importance on oracy the way we used to when it was actually worth something. That's the key element – the students don't see its value."
Secondary English teacher

Areas that need further discussion…

While there is consensus on the importance of oracy, there are unresolved questions about how best to reflect on, embed and assess it within GCSE English.

How far should oracy education reflect real-world communication?

> **"The lack of speaking and listening within GCSE English is a real missed opportunity because it could bring the subject to life for so many young people when the course reflects the media they consume."**
> Russell Findlay, CEO, Speakers Trust

Conversations highlighted both the opportunities and the challenges in **making oracy more relevant to students' everyday communication.** Many see real value in building on the ways young people already use their voices - through digital platforms, social media, podcasts or vlogs - as a route to greater engagement and confidence. At the same time, contributors recognised the importance of also helping students develop the rigour and formal communication skills they need for further study and employment.

Could spoken responses play a greater role in the assessment of reading skills?

> **"There are many students who are very capable, but are unable to express that knowledge in a written form. We need to think about how we might assess our students to make English as a qualification more accessible and enjoyable for them."**
> Leandri Dannhauser, Network lead advisor for English, Ark

The idea of **oral responses to exam questions** was also raised, with some seeing this as a more inclusive format, rather than requiring all students to write their responses. Structured discussions or viva-style tasks were suggested as ways to **broaden what counts as success**. Such approaches were regarded as offering richer opportunities to demonstrate understanding - not just for English, but for a broad range of GCSE

subjects. There was no clear consensus as to whether these alternatives should be an option for selected pupils or be made universally available.

In addition, there was recognition that assessing knowledge orally depends on the students first developing the **confidence and skills to express themselves** - something that requires strong classroom practice in oracy.

How should oracy be assessed to carry real value?

> **"Talk has been eroded. By treating speaking and listening as a bolt-on, it's been removed or undervalued in many schools – the importance of it has been taken away."**
> Yamina Bibi, Education consultant

There is broad agreement that the current spoken language endorsement lacks credibility. Some argue that oral assessments must contribute to results if oracy is to be genuinely valued, while others raise concerns about workload, consistency and fairness across schools and colleges. A key consideration is **how to design assessment that recognises oracy's worth** without reducing it to one task unrepresentative of a student's overall speaking skills, and without creating inequity or excessive burden.

Taking the conversation further...

Voices from across the education community are united in recognising the importance of oracy, but offer different ideas of how change should happen. **We're committed to driving these vital discussions forward.**

Keep up to date at go.pearson.com/letstalkenglish as we explore how best to support students, schools and the English subject.

*GCSE English refers to both the GCSE English Language and Literature specifications across all awarding bodies