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# Want students to be good speakers? Teach them to write

Natalie  
Wexler



A push for ‘oracy’ in England points to connections between writing and oral language.

Ever heard of ‘oracy’? If you live in the United States, you probably haven’t encountered the term, but it’s all the rage in England. And the buzz there has prompted observations about the connections between speaking and writing.

Oracy, for the uninitiated, essentially means (as Greg Ashman [puts it](#) in the *Spectator*) “making speeches and discussing ideas”. It’s become a hot topic in England because the ruling Labour Party has made it a centrepiece of their education policy. That has led some to worry that oracy will be treated as yet another supposed stand-alone skill, like ‘critical thinking’, when in fact such skills are highly dependent on context. More recently, Labour’s Education Secretary has [tried to calm](#) those fears.

Although the United States has yet to embrace oracy as a goal of education, its educators can glean some valuable insights from the discussion the oracy movement has sparked in England. (England is, of course, part of the United Kingdom, but the other divisions of the United Kingdom control their own education systems, and it appears that the drive for oracy is limited to England.)

We’re not talking here about simply teaching kids how to talk. Obviously, virtually all children learn to do that without explicit instruction, at least when it comes to conversing in their native language. But there are different kinds of talk, including a more formal kind that most kids don’t acquire naturally.

The benefits of learning how to engage in formal oral discourse aren’t limited to the ability to make public speeches or engage in formal debates, activities that only a small minority of adults are called upon to do. As one British oracy advocate at the University of Cambridge [has argued](#), oracy can also enable students to make a good first impression, excel at job interviews, make friends and generally boost self-confidence.

Based on his experience designing and teaching an ‘oracy-based curriculum’ at a school some years ago, this advocate – James Mannion – found the focus on oracy to be transformative for the middle-school students who participated.

“It’s taught me to stand up for myself and that what I want to say is important,” one student said of the curriculum. “Now I have the courage to speak in all of my classes,” said another. Mannion reports that the cohort that got the curriculum “went on to achieve the best set of exam results that school had ever seen,” with students from disadvantaged backgrounds benefiting the most.

## Oracy and writing

The thoughts on oracy that I’ve found most intriguing come from a British education commentator named Clare Sealy, who has drawn links between speaking and writing. Learning to write, Sealy argues, is a key part of what enables the more formal kind of speaking that has been labelled ‘oracy’.

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Writing, [she argues](#), requires “learning a new language, a language that is no one’s natal tongue”. When we engage in conversation, as opposed to writing, we often use fragments rather than full sentences, our language is less precise, and we use simpler sentence structure and vocabulary. We’re far more likely to say ‘well’ or ‘anyway’ to connect our thoughts than to use a word like ‘moreover’. (I first heard this insight about written language being like a second language years ago from Judith Hochman, my co-author on the book *The Writing Revolution*.)

Writing the way we speak – especially the way many kids speak – doesn’t work well for several reasons. We can’t see the reader of our prose the way we see a person we’re conversing with, and they can’t see us. That means we can’t clarify vague language with gestures or intonation, and the reader can’t signal when they’re confused. In addition, grammatical mistakes in writing are distracting to the reader in a way they may not be in spoken language. The errors sit there on the page or screen rather than vanishing into thin air.

One benefit of learning to use this ‘second language’ of writing is that it helps with reading comprehension. If you can use a word like ‘moreover’ or a structure like a subordinating conjunction in your own writing, you’re likely to be able to understand those things when you encounter them in your reading.

Another benefit is that when we learn to express ourselves in more complex ways, our thoughts become more complex as well. Learning what

Sealy calls the “language of ‘write’” enables “organisation and extensions of thought” and “turbocharges the ability to think abstractly and analytically,” she says. That learning then carries over to academic talk, or oracy, which “floats on a sea of writing”.

At the same time, writing is much harder than speaking – at least, harder than speaking informally. In cognitive science terms, it imposes a heavier ‘cognitive load’ on working memory. And if we’re trying to write about complex topics, or topics we’re not familiar with, that only adds to the load.

To enable students to learn to write, teachers need to modulate that cognitive load by breaking the process into manageable chunks, beginning at the sentence level, and providing explicit instruction and repeated practice in each chunk. They also need to ensure students have enough knowledge of the topic to write about it coherently. It might be relatively easy to write about a topic we know well and virtually impossible to write about one we don’t understand.

And as the grade levels go up and the topics become more complex, the task of writing becomes more challenging. That’s why writing – along with reading comprehension and oracy – can’t be seen as a skill or set of skills that can be taught entirely in the abstract.

### **A two-way connection between speaking and writing**

But if we see writing as connected to speaking as well as listening and reading – and all of them as part of the overall process of learning – students can benefit greatly. As Sealy points out, learning the complex language of writing can lead to

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more complex thinking and speaking. But the relationship goes the other way too: thinking and speaking about a topic, even informally, can fuel writing about it.

I observed that two-way process in a classroom in Monroe, Louisiana, a high-poverty district that has adapted *The Writing Revolution* method to the content-rich curriculum it uses. In one third-grade classroom where students were reading *Charlotte’s Web*, the teacher first led a discussion about what made Wilbur different from the other animals on Zuckerman’s farm.

Then she gave students an independent writing activity that drew on the ideas that had surfaced in the



discussion: completing the sentence stem, “Wilbur is different from the other animals on the farm” with the conjunctions ‘because’, ‘but’, and ‘so’. After that, students engaged in further whole-class discussion based on the responses they and their classmates had given.

Even using simple conjunctions like those can enrich spoken language. K–2 teachers in Monroe told me they see changes in their students after just a few months of engaging in activities like ‘because/but/so’ orally and as a whole class.

“It improves their oral communication tenfold,” one first-grade teacher said. “At the beginning of the year, they would give one-word answers. But as we’ve talked about complete sentences, students will give me a complete sentence. And then other kids will say, can I add something to their sentence? And they’ll add a ‘because’.”

Those activities are laying the foundation for more complex spoken language – and more complex thinking and writing. ‘Because’ or ‘so’ leads to ‘as a result’ or ‘therefore’, and ‘but’ leads to ‘however’ and ‘although’. The K–2 teachers I spoke with predicted that early exposure to written language forms would enable their students to thrive in later years. And teachers at higher grade levels confirmed that prediction. “Every year, kids come into higher grade levels with stronger writing,” one sixth-grade social studies teacher told me.

Teachers at the middle and high school levels also told me that the writing instruction has boosted students’ reading comprehension, motivation and learning in general. While they didn’t mention improvements in students’ oral language, I’ve heard that from other teachers who have used the method.

Oracy in the sense of public speaking or debating may require some skills that writing doesn’t, like knowing where to pause for emphasis. But there’s clearly a significant amount of overlap. In [her memoir](#), Justice Sonia Sotomayor described how she initially struggled with writing assignments as an undergraduate at Princeton but then realised she could draw on her experience as a high school debater in crafting her papers. And the rest is history.

It would make sense for American schools to pay more attention to oracy,

but the risk – as in England – is that it would become the latest cure-all fad and be seen as a skill that can be taught in isolation. We don’t need separate ‘oracy curricula’ with their own topics, just as we don’t need separate writing curricula.

Oracy and writing, along with speaking and listening, need to be seen as components of learning that can only develop in tandem with knowledge – and that knowledge should be provided through a coherent, content-rich curriculum that begins in the earliest grades. Students won’t be able to speak well, or write well, about topics they know little about. At the same time, both speaking and writing are ways of deepening and reinforcing knowledge.

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*This article first appeared on the author’s blog, [Minding the Gap](#).*

Natalie Wexler [[@natwexler](#) on X] is an education writer who has spoken before a wide range of audiences in the United States and elsewhere, focusing on literacy, cognitive science and fairness. She is the author of *Beyond the Science of Reading: Connecting Literacy Instruction to the Science of Learning and The Knowledge Gap: The Hidden Cause of America’s Broken Education System – And How to Fix It*, and the co-author of *The Writing Revolution: A Guide to Advancing Thinking Through Writing in All Subjects and Grades*. She is the host of *Season 1 of the Knowledge Matters Podcast – ‘Reading Comprehension Revisited’*.