

Vox populi: a blueprint for oracy

Roy Blatchford

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In 1975, The Bullock Report - *A Language for Life* was a landmark publication for schools. It asserted the importance of language across the curriculum, and the need for all teachers to harness in classrooms the four key skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing. Oral language was given a particular emphasis.

Nearly fifty years on, and classrooms in the UK still do not give routine attention to how children's and students' oral skills are joyfully and rigorously promoted.

In a world in which English is the lingua franca, ironically it is left to other countries to make the English *language* sing: visit any school or college from Brazil to Italy to Vietnam to watch the 'fun and fundamentals' of English being taught to ensure their children can operate happily in global English.

The launch in March of the [Oracy Education Commission](#), chaired by Geoff Barton (ASCL's outgoing General Secretary), is a special opportunity to champion oracy in the UK. The Commission has set itself two properly ambitious goals:

- (i) to outline an evidence-based framework for oracy education
- (ii) to make recommendations for the implementation of a national entitlement to oracy education for all children.

Looking back to the Bullock report (and I remember as a young teacher its fanfare and press coverage), it is one thing to make recommendations - it is quite another to change teachers' familiar practices. And this word 'oracy' itself will need a bit of selling; teachers need to know *Why?*

First, the framework: the commissioners drawn from all corners of education, academia, the arts, health and business will have little trouble in securing a bundle of evidence. Voice 21's established national work and benchmarks are a fair starting point, alongside Speech & Language UK's strategies for the 1.9 million children struggling with talking and understanding words.

At the heart of the Commission's focus on a framework - especially one with the spoken word at its heart - will be their wrestle over the so-called Macnamara Fallacy. It runs as follows: *The first step is to measure whatever can be easily measured.*

This is OK as far as it goes. The second step is to disregard that which can't be easily measured or to give it an arbitrary quantitative value. This is artificial and misleading. The third step is to presume that what can't be measured easily really isn't important. This is blindness. The fourth step is to say what can't be easily measured really doesn't exist. This is suicide.

Second, the recommendations: like it or not, our system of high profile accountability, testing and inspection determines practice. Unless examination boards, the DfE and Ofsted act sympathetically in concert, any recommendations will escape implementation.

To take one example: assuming Ofsted remains in some guise, a future inspection framework would need to include a paragraph on oracy across the curriculum. Inspectors' current paragraph on reading which features in every published report has unquestionably raised the profile of the joys and struggles of reading, especially in secondary schools.

The last Labour government created and delivered the National Strategies, so watch this space. Assuming one of the purposes of the Commission is to influence the new government's Secretary of State for Education and shape policy from 2025 onwards (half a century after Bullock), here's my top seven for inclusion:

An oracy manifesto

1. A Year of Oracy in 2026 (an echo of the Year of Reading in 1998).
2. Top quality ESOL and EAL courses provided for all primary and secondary teachers, and those courses woven into initial training: to teach how the English language actually works for native and non-native speakers. We speak, then learn the grammar.
3. In every classroom: '*Think what you are going to say next*' to be written above every teacher's whiteboard, thus presuming children will:
 - build on one another's answers
 - stand up in class when they speak
 - speak with their eyes
 - speak in full phrases and sentences
 - project their voices so that all their peers can hear
 - listen with intent, and respond articulately and thoughtfully.

And teachers will:

- ask for one student to build on another student's response, and another, and another, before giving their view
- not accept monosyllabic answers from their students (unless it's a 'eureka' moment)

- not interrupt children when they are half way through a sentence to say 'good' or 'right'
- build meaningful oral assessments into every term's planning.

(entrenched teachers' practices have to change: 'old dogs' will need to unlearn their 'old tricks').

4. A 3-18 framework rooted in the magic quartet of *oracy, vocabulary, reading, and cultural capital*; each must feature as humans think, talk, read and write - in that order - to make sense of their worlds.

5. A national all-through testing and examination system which includes **25% oral** assessment, 25% written paper, 25% on-line, and 25% portfolios (podcast/film/AI generated 'text').

6. An inspection framework which captures demonstrably high quality oracy as an integral aspect of personal and character development.

7. *And*, a curriculum entitlement to *singing*, for all young people in our schools.

In countless classrooms I watch students of all ages barely opening their mouths; too often they mutter. Offer them the opportunity to sing and rap, and their spirits and voices are awoken.

In 'Hard Rain', one of the great protest songs of the 1960s - and in the best oral tradition - Bob Dylan sang:

*Then I'll stand on the ocean until I start sinkin'
But I'll know my song well before I start singin'*

I trust once this oracy blueprint is written, it will be available on a podcast - and sung too.

Roy Blatchford's latest publication is [*The A - Z of Great Classrooms*](#).