



National Research & Development Center to Improve
EDUCATION FOR SECONDARY ENGLISH LEARNERS

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Equitable and Quality Education for English Learners and All Other Students: The Role of Oracy

AÍDA WALQUI

We tend to be impressed by people who speak in clear, precise language and use examples or metaphors that help us understand the topic at hand. People who speak this way typically anticipate our questions or concerns and then, when it is our turn to talk, listen to our replies attentively and use our ideas to help build mutual understanding. This ability to be articulate, attentive, and responsive is typically considered a natural gift (as in, “X is such a good speaker”). However, oracy, the study of how to be a good interlocutor and presenter of ideas, is socialized. It is apprenticed in supportive, deliberate social contexts. English Learners, and all other students, can learn to be effective communicators if they are provided with guidance, practice, and support.

This brief explores the term oracy, its definition and historical development, its value in schooling and democratic life, and the features that contribute to an effective apprenticeship in oracy as a powerful tool for engaging in social acts. I also provide some guidelines for

its development in classrooms. Although this brief focuses mostly on adolescent English Learners, the comments, characteristics, and suggested practices regarding oracy also work for K–12 students who speak only English.

Origins of Oracy

The term *oracy* was first introduced in 1965 by British researcher and educator Andrew Wilkinson (1965, p. 13) with the purpose of underscoring the importance of developing complex oral skills as one of the goals of schooling, intended to carry as much weight in the curriculum as literacy and numeracy. At the time, oracy enjoyed a few years of attention in English schools, mainly through the work of the National Oracy Project (Norman, 1992). However, as it often happens in the United States with educational initiatives, oracy in the United Kingdom fell victim to the waves of change, and it subsided under a return to basic skills. In the last decade, however, oracy has been regaining salience and increasingly is being implemented, mainly through the work of practitioners organized in Voice 21 and researchers at the Universities of York and Cambridge (see, e.g., Mercer, 2019, and Alexander, 2020).

In school, the development of oracy entails apprenticing, i.e. socializing students into the use of speech and associated systems (e.g., intonation, rhythm, gesture, body position, gaze) in order to communicate in clear,

coherent, and impactful ways in school and life. Oracy requires listening carefully to interlocutors and indicating that they are listening by, for example, using empathy markers (*that is terrible*), repeating parts of each other's utterances, using intonation and gestures, back-channeling (*aha, um*), and so on. Furthermore, speakers must attempt to understand each other's message and intent, linking the message to what they already know about the subject in order to respond in desired ways.

The changes needed to introduce oracy into the curriculum require a serious reorientation. First, introducing oracy requires moving away from the separation of language skills—speaking, listening, reading, and writing—which is so popular, especially in English Learner education. Oracy integrates speaking and listening with planning, organizing, responding responsibly, and connecting ideas. Furthermore, it requires a move toward equity and symmetry between teacher and students, and also among students, and it requires the development of student voice and autonomy, as will be discussed later on.

Why Oracy Is Important

In today's world, oracy is indispensable in building student success in school and responsible participation in society. Oracy enables individuals to interact orally with a variety of audiences in diverse situations and for multiple purposes, and to critically understand and respond to intentionality. Because today's "information" era has the power to misinform, spread disinformation, and manipulate, we

need our citizens to be interactive and critical consumers and users of oral texts.

In addition, by participating in reciprocal exchanges in, and out of, the classroom about themes of importance, learner engagement and intrinsic motivation—the human response to innate needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy—are fostered.

Necessary Conditions for the Development of Oracy

1. Learning is guided by a sociocultural/ecological understanding. In this view, learning is considered a process of apprenticeship that occurs in specific contexts. Teachers constantly demonstrate that they are practitioners of the disciplinary field they teach, and thus they model its practice for students. Learners are offered relevant and enticing opportunities to actively engage in ambitious and well-supported activity in order to be socialized into valued subject matter practices. As one would expect, learning opportunities have to be perceived as worthwhile in order to engage student motivation and subsequent action.

As students talk in groups, assisted by teacher support, they gradually appropriate the practices of the discipline. Students learn disciplinary concepts and analytic and language practices through modeling and invitations that build their competence and autonomy. Eventually, these practices are adapted and modified to suit student needs. When learners have built their autonomy and no longer need modeling or support of practiced skills, it is necessary to move into new practices and other disciplines.

An ecological approach assumes that learning takes place in a social context that is characterized by complexity, fluidity, and unpredictability. Not all learners start from the same point, nor do all develop in the same way (Tagarelli et al., 2016). Teachers need to marshal all available resources to provide rich interactive opportunities for their students, keeping track of how

individual students engage in order to plan the responsive scaffolds that will accelerate their growth.

2. Equitable relations are established in the classroom. Classroom interactions have been studied since the 1970s and characterized as responding to a pattern called IRF: the teacher initiates the interaction (I), the student responds (R), and the teacher provides feedback (F), as in this example:

Teacher: Where were you born?

Student: I was born in Perú

Teacher: Very good!

In this format, teachers have the authority to set the agenda and the power to judge. They also are able to practice using language much more frequently than their students (van Lier, 2001). Typically, they stand in front of groups of students and lecture or control the class. And during the infrequent times when a few students get to speak when they are asked a question directly, the IRF pattern is used. There is no possibility that students can move into related topics, ask questions, or otherwise get involved. Questions are closed and require one correct answer, which erodes whatever enthusiasm students may have. In addition, teachers in the habit of requiring that student responses be stated in full sentences do not offer students the opportunity to provide personally relevant and socially appropriate responses. In these cases, classes are organized undemocratically and asymmetrically.

Developing oracy requires that students engage in open interactions that are focused on the class theme and, working in dyads or groups of three or four, respond contingently to each other's ideas and share rights and duties for participation. This process enriches all partners in the interaction and helps students reach a joint understanding that is richer than a teacher's transmission of ideas peppered by IRF interactions with only a few students.

3. Learner agency and autonomy are promoted.

A true dialogic interaction requires initiative and responsiveness. As interlocutors, students drive the direction the interaction is going to take. As they ask each other questions, respond, or offer comments, they act academically: they agree and expand, disagree and propose, provide personal examples, and contribute ideas they find relevant. Practicing these types of engagements in a safe classroom environment prepares them for when they have to use their oral competence with others in different contexts. Autonomy is fostered through agency and participation. Naturally, the teacher must plan deliberately, focus students' attention on pivotal themes and details under consideration, and provide the appropriate structure to enable a class energized by many simultaneous engagements.

4. Critical stances are encouraged. Most English Learners in the United States are minoritized populations. Transformation of the control and inequality they experience is an important educational objective. Students have lived experiences in which they have been made to feel less than others. But in school they can develop a critical, but

reasoned, voice to help others understand different points of view. The two examples presented in the next section show how critical, socially responsive voices can be developed in class.

5. Learning opportunities are perceived by students as worthwhile.

When I was a PhD student at Stanford University during the second half of the 1990s, a lot of research attention was being paid to why students dropped out of school. I remember discussing this with Walter Secada at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, who was heading a national research study on the topic. I suggested to him that researchers needed to sit in high school classes and then shadow a student deemed at danger of dropping out. After taking me up on my suggestion, Walter reported that the experience almost made the research team change the title of their study to *Why Don't More Kids Drop Out of School?* They had experienced a problem that is still pervasive in U.S. schools: the irrelevant, passive, and unengaging nature of activities in class, a problem that has been exacerbated by the almost universal presence of Chromebooks or computers in classrooms.

When students are invited to discuss topics of relevance to their lives, or when the relevance of seemingly remote topics is made clear, they engage. My colleagues and I in Quality Teaching for English Learners (QTEL) and in the National Research & Development Center to Improve Education for Secondary English Learners have seen this situation firsthand. We have also seen the amazing level of engagement and activity that is possible when students' discussions about

class themes are seen as pertinent—or, even better, when they request to discuss follow-up topics that steer classes toward new, related themes.

6. Metaskills are developed. It is impossible to ask students to engage in activities they cannot envision. Providing guidelines for engaging in a task (e.g., “How do we engage in historical comparisons of two alternative views of this incident?”) helps students make sense of incomprehensible requests. Academic behavior is rule bound, and rules provide road maps for engaging in specified activity. Making students aware of those rules and how they manifest themselves linguistically enables students to follow the rules initially and then, after they have practiced, vary—or even change—the rules. In fact, the road to learner autonomy is supported by metacognition. The more students are aware of the unspoken, invisible rules that guide specific behavior, the better and, eventually, the more autonomously students will be able to perform.

7. To observe development, it is important to see it unfolding over time, diachronically. Ascertaining whether students have learned, for example, to defend an idea in oral presentations can be appreciated only through a temporal analysis. Only when we pursue the trajectory of student learning over time—and, ideally, document this change—can we recognize aspects of what students can do as a result of a teacher deliberately fostering talk. Initially, the use of routines and formulaic expressions scaffold students’ apprenticeship. The signal that students are on the road to autonomy is when they have appropriated and re-created these supports.

The issue of repair (correction) should only emerge when students do not understand each other. Then they can ask for reformulations or elaborations. If communication is successful, albeit ungrammatical, there is no need to stop the flow of conversation. Given constant models, students either overcome their misuse of language, or the teacher—attentive observer—can discuss with students an issue that merits reorientation.

Two Examples of Oracy

I elaborate on two examples that come from the deliberate development of oracy at two ends of the continuum of the classification of English Learners: newcomers and students bureaucratically classified as long-term English Learners. The first example comes from a 9th grade ELA class taught by Lee Hartman at the time when

he was a teacher at the International Newcomer Academy in Fort Worth, Texas, in 2014. The second comes from a lesson Yael Glick taught in 2016 at Voyages Academy, a New York City high school for students who have been pushed out or have dropped out of school.

A Newcomer Class Discusses Ethical Dilemmas

The following transcript comes from an English language arts (ELA) class for students who had been in the United States between 3 and 8 months. Some of the students had been studying English and subject matter content for only 3 months, and the students who had been in the class the longest had attended the school for 8 months. Students in this class read the same texts that students in 9th grade ELA classes were reading in other schools.

In the following excerpt, a group of four boys engage in a discussion of Chapter 9 of Elie Wiesel's *Night*, analyzing young Wiesel's actions. In this chapter, Wiesel and his father, who is very ill, are being transported by train to concentration camps along with hundreds of other Jews. A German soldier throws a few pieces of bread to the packed car holding Wiesel and his father. Wiesel gets a piece and now has to consider whether to give it to his father or eat it himself. Mr. Hartman has asked students to

support each other with an analysis of the motivations and mindset of the protagonist.

A discussion quickly develops regarding what kind of person Elie Wiesel was based on his actions. (In the memoir, the son offers the food to his dying father, who insists the son should eat it.) The students start by negotiating whether or not Wiesel is a “good” or a “bad” person. Initially, only one student proposes that he is a good person and gives his justification. The other three students maintain that he is a bad person because, for a moment, he considers keeping the bread for himself. The students fluctuate between agreeing and disagreeing with these ideas, sharing their reasons until one of the students who initially saw the character as bad is convinced by the evidence presented to him in the text and emphatically announces to his group, “Actually, he is a good person.” He then gives examples from the text to explain why he changed his opinion, and the group ultimately ends up agreeing with his interpretation. I have highlighted words that students emphasize.

Student 1: I think he is bad.

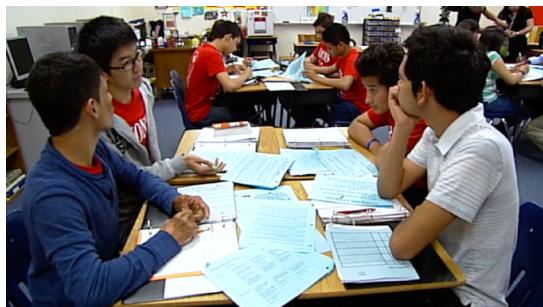
Student 2: But in the sentence 2, he is *helping* his father . . . giving his bread and soup . . . but even he giving the food[,] his father is also going to die. So the man tell him, “Stop to do that,” is not helpful. ***Even though he help him, he also will die.***

Student 3: I agree with you, yeah [pointing to Student 1].

Student 1: So . . . he have a bad mind?

Student 2: A bad mind? . . . No, ***I don't think so.***

Student 4: Maybe he have like a bad think . . . and a bad . . . he want to do the bad things . . . and his mind thinking always bad . . . that will be possible. What do you think?



Student 1: So *I think he is a bad person*. What do you think?

Student 2: You think Elie is a bad person?

Student 1: I do.

[Students pause to think.]

Student 2: *Maybe, maybe* the first time . . . [pauses to think]. Oh no, no, no, no, yeah. *Actually, is good* . . . is a good person because like you say . . . in this paragraph he help his father [points to the paragraph in the text].

Student 1: Yes, he is help!

Student 2: Yes, so he is a *good* person. The first time, no. Because he think that . . . he decide . . . he is deciding if he can help or not . . . but in the end, he help the father. Right?

[Other students nod.]

Student 2: *So he is a good person*.

Student 1: Yeah, *I think he is a good person*. He already try to help.

Student 2: Okay.

Student 1: So let's write that down.

In this discussion, we do not see any IRFs. Rather, we see the joint construction of understanding through extended interactions. Of course, Mr. Hartman had invited students to use all their oral skills to read and annotate the chapter. The objective of the lesson was to agree on how Wiesel behaved. Mr. Hartman did not have one answer in mind; he invited the students to engage in an open exploration. When students are most engaged, they talk, move their arms and hands, and make supporting face gestures. They point to the text for support, and in general their critical stances are supported by the class. During this lesson, five other groups in the classroom were enthusiastically engaged simultaneously, constructing their own interpretations, and supporting each other. This example supports the notion that

students developing oracy have to perceive learning opportunities as worthwhile and use all their developing resources in order to make joint sense of the situation.

English Learners Bureaucratically Classified As Long-Term Discuss Heroic Acts

English Learners classified as long-term—those who have been English Learners for six years or more—can, for the most part, interact successfully in casual situations. But usually, they cannot engage successfully in discipline-specific oral presentations or discussions of academic themes. The main reason they have not developed these abilities is because they have not been offered opportunities to do so.

Ms. Glick, recognizing the immense potential of her students, and in need of quickly preparing them to pass five Regents tests, rigorous tests that require that NY students read and write analytical essays in diverse disciplines, designed lessons that would appeal to the students' sense of justice. The unit I codeveloped with her was called "Youth, Power, and Protest." In the first lesson of the unit, students analyzed the participation of children in protests during school desegregation. In the second lesson, students were invited to analyze the role of protest in sports. Before reading about American athletes

Tommie Smith and John Carlos and Australian runner Peter Norman jointly protesting while receiving the gold, bronze, and silver medals, respectively, for the 200-meter race in the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, students were asked to discuss the iconic picture of NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick kneeling on the field during the national anthem to protest the treatment of Black people in the United States. In the following transcript, the students discuss what they see in the photograph and what it makes them think about.

Boy 1: Something that I found surprising is that Colin Kaepernick was the founder of the protest, and currently he is suspended of all actions from the NFL because of his actions. It was a really big deal, and the headquarters at the NFL decided to suspend him just because there was a lot of controversy because of his actions and the protest and it being worldwide now.



Girl 3: So, to add on to what Alex said, he is a very important person because he knew the consequences it was going to be when he took a knee during the anthem. So he decided to make the action to help the social injustice going on, knowing that he is so popular and a lot of people know about him; he knew it was going to make a greater impact on the world than just being suspended. He took a risk for what he believed in.

Boy 2: What I was surprised about was the courage he had. The national anthem for a country is one of the most prized things, I guess, in a football game. And for even not do what you are supposed to do, which is to put your hand on your heart, and to kneel down instead. I think that is a very big sign of disrespect, and he showed the fact that he was angry. Not by hitting anyone or by violence or nothing, just by simply saying, "If you're going to treat me in a different way than everyone else, then I'm not going to respect your country."

Girl 3: I am not sure it is disrespect. In fact, think about when you go on your knees. It is at church to show respect for God, or in other countries that have kings and queens, sometimes people kneel down. I think he is respectfully protesting. Look at his face. He is not gesturing; he is not angry. He is protesting, but in a peaceful way, with respect.

Girl 1: Yeah, I agree. The thing that surprises me is how so few teammates join him. Because in school, they even teach us that a team wins together. And team members are always—it doesn't matter if one of the people on your team are wrong, you all go with what's going on. You can't choose sides when you're on a team. But in his team, although other people, I guess, they didn't agree with what he had to offer—with what he had to say about what was going on—only three of them stood and actually kneeled on their feet. As a team, they should have all just went behind him regardless of what was going on. They should have all defended him as a team.

Girl 2: I agree with what Abby has to say. Right now, it just looks like they all took their own decision of how they felt in it. And when you're representing yourselves and you're on a team, you're representing the whole team. Who you are as people, as players, and how your mind is and where your head's at, in a way. And right now, it's very diverse. And I do feel if they were a full team and the team players were combined together, it would have made a bigger difference rather than just three people kneeling down.

As we can see from the transcript, students are attuned to each other's contributions and add to them contingently. They are very excited to be discussing an event that happened a few weeks before and to be able to make connections to the Civil Rights era, which they had studied the week before. They all participate; they all look at each other and reinforce their ideas with body language. Ms. Glick's invitation had been open—she did not have just one answer in mind

that she imposed on the students. At the same time, she kept track of ideas that would need to be revisited in order to understand the issues in more nuanced ways. In fact, to understand the main reading, students had to use metacognitive processes and formulaic expressions, which helped them appropriate the same strategies orally that good readers appropriate when reading text.

Four Strategies that Teachers Can Use to Develop Oracy in English Learners

Developing oracy signals a clear departure from the way in which many classes operate today. Here are a few of the actions necessary to foster this pedagogical transformation.

- **Invite students to exercise their ability to perceive.** Once students perceive, they can act (e.g., contest, agree with, exemplify, support) through the use of language. Student engagement begins with their

ability to notice an invitation to an activity, to decide that it would be both interesting and valuable to engage in it, and to learn the steps required for successful participation. This means that teachers have to make those invitations enticing. Student motivation is not a prerequisite for a successful class but rather a requirement of lessons and invitations to participate.

- **Structure invitations that are substantive and enticing to learners.** A structure is a routine—like counting steps when learning to dance—that helps students build initial participation. As students begin to feel more in control, and appropriate the routine, the counting of steps nor the scaffolding routine are needed. Student appropriation means that students will be creative with the structures, modifying them, or replacing them altogether, to suit a diversity of purposes. For example, students in Ms. Glick’s class engaged in a round-robin conversation. They had to take turns, moving clockwise around the table, to articulate their ideas, building on each other’s participation. This very simple routine ensured that all students participated. However, once they know that it is good to have their voices and opinions be heard, round robins are no longer needed, and what is learned is the value of jointly constructing interpretations. Teachers need to understand the **why** of routines; in this case, the round robin is used to engage all students in a small group to express their opinions and justifications following a predetermined order (the routine). If teachers and students understand the purposes of activities and how they interlink with other activities to foster deeper student understanding, the goal of a task will have been accomplished.

Inviting students to be in control of their own interactions frees teachers to listen attentively to a couple of groups to determine what needs to be supported next and to see (and annotate) how students are developing over time. During these observations, it is important for teachers to resist

the temptation to intervene or correct. If the issue that tempted a teacher to participate persists, then it is time for the teacher to provide a 1- to 2-minute explanation to the group or the whole class depending on how pervasive it is. But often students will self-correct, and those “aha” moments are more valuable than other corrections.

- **Use video examples and transcripts to build teachers’ understanding and ability to implement critical, democratic, quality talk in the classroom.** Just as their students do, teachers need to know what the successful accomplishment of a task looks like. A video doesn’t need to be professionally shot to help teachers understand what may have been useful to do during a discussion. And perhaps schools could build a library of school videos exclusively for the use of their teachers.

Naturally, a culture of mutual respect will need to be fostered during the activity. This culture reflects the sense that all teachers are apprenticing in their craft, just as their students are. Teachers’ gaining awareness of where they are in their apprenticeship can only be helpful in keeping them focused.

- **Set up collaborative coaching sessions.** Mutual teacher coaching can be immensely helpful in developing teachers’ ability to invite students into oracy practices. A small group of teachers who teach the same class can work together to grow their knowledge of the subject and to prepare lessons. After the observation they can discuss the lesson democratically and critically, that is, they make comments about successes and

limitations indicating reasons, suggesting next steps, with nobody monopolizing the discussion. In these interactions, no voice has more authority than others. The group can agree that all its teachers will be observed, and over time they will develop their professionalism through the use of internal accountability: they will know how to develop students' potential optimally, and their commitment to everybody growing together will be reinforced.

Moving our classes into settings that develop oracy, literacy, and numeracy will not be an easy change, but it will be an immensely rewarding one for everybody involved. I hope this brief has provided clear ideas about oracy and how to develop it with our English Learners and their English-only speaking peers.

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