ORACY MATTERS

The development of talking
and listening in education

EDITED BY

Margaret MacLure
Terry Phillips
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ORACY MATTERS

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Margaret MacLure
Terry Phillips
Andrew Wilkinson

General editor's introduction

The present is the second volume in this series to grow out of the biennial international symposia on the teaching of English organised at the University of East Anglia. (The previous volume was *The Writing of Writing*, edited by Andrew Wilkinson, 1986.) A detailed academic introduction to the contents of the book is provided by one of its editors, Margaret MacLure, as the first major essay, but it is particularly appropriate that the third editor should again be Professor Andrew Wilkinson, since he first coined the term 'oracy' in the 1960s on the analogy of literacy to stress the importance of the language skills of listening and talking. We have come a long way in curriculum thinking since that time as the present volume makes abundantly clear. It is now unthinkable that language work in schools in general, or in English departments in particular, should not pay due attention to this fundamental area of work, although as Pat Jones shows in his complementary volume, *Lip Service* (Open University Press, 1988), the reality of the classroom is often some distance behind the best of theory and expectation as demonstrated in these pages.

As, in British secondary schools, the new General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is being implemented for the first time this year, my own experience of wide-ranging school visits confirms the view that this is one of the elements of the new examination that has caused the most concern to teachers. The problem is how to capture for assessment purposes the volatile nature of talk, how to allow, within the structure of an individual examination assessment, for the dynamic nature of the talk within a group, the inter-action including listening as well as talking as an integral element. The biggest problem of all is how to engage in any kind of assessment procedure without, at the same time, destroying what is being assessed.

Yet, in spite of the difficulties, the fight that took place to establish oracy as a compulsory component of the new examination (and one that is ultimately to be extended to other subjects besides English) was a vital one. This book is far removed from being concerned with examinations as its main focus – it has much more significant matters to deal with in its pages. Yet, given the British

educational system, the inclusion within an external examination structure, gives an accolade and status to the subject that carries downwards into the rest of the school curriculum, even into first schools.

The International Convention (which I was able to attend) was certainly not without its own controversies and it would be a pity if the quality of the individual articles which the editors have assembled here were to obscure the strength of some of the powerful exchanges in debate that some of the papers evoked. As Douglas Barnes's important paper makes clear oracy has a political face and it is one which we may well have to come to terms with more and more as we move into a period, in the United Kingdom, of centrally imposed curriculum. The report of the Kingman Committee on the teaching of language will probably be published at about the same time as this volume and some members of that committee were at the International Oracy Convention two years ago. It is to be hoped that the Committee was able to take on board the best of the important ideas that were aired at that time. What is quite certain is that no narrowly conceived 'skills' model of listening and talking competence will meet our needs. The future of oracy in the classroom, not just in English classes, but as a means and instrument of learning across the whole curriculum stands very much in the balance, and the present volume is an important contribution to what is likely to be a continuing debate.

The international nature of the Convention is underlined by the inclusion of several papers from Canada in the present volume and one, most interestingly, from the Netherlands. It is a pity that the limitations in attendance (because of the costs involved) and in space prevents a fuller reflection of the important work in this area also being undertaken in Australia and New Zealand where oracy is, if anything, even more firmly established in classroom practice than it is in the United Kingdom and North America.

The processes of 'active learning' to use MacLure's key phrase, and one that underlies the philosophy underpinning many of the contributors to these pages, is ultimately about more than learning processes themselves. It is also about empowerment. Through finding their own voice, in speech as much as in writing, pupils (or, rather, students) can discover how to take control over their own lives and how to inter-relate with the lives of others. Much work has been done in the last few years in the area of Personal and Social Education (some of it under threat in terms of the time that will be available for such areas of education under the 1988 Education Act); the place where much of this work has been taking place, and will have to take place in the future, is in these spaces in the school, the timetable and the curriculum, in which active learning through talk is not just encouraged but taken for granted. There are plenty of studies to show that in practice this is sound preparation for working life as well.

Yet there is still a need to persuade some teachers, and many students, parents and employers, of the central importance of this work. For those seeking arguments which cogently explore the issue from a consistent and sound theoretical perspective, the present volume will serve their needs. It makes a fine

coping stone to a discussion that Andrew Wilkinson began some twenty years ago – and that is likely to be still continuing into the twenty that lie ahead.

Anthony Adams

Contents

Introduction. Oracy: current trends in context

MARGARET MACLURE

Like many edited collections, this book had its origins in a conference – in this case the International Oracy Convention, held at the University of East Anglia during the rainy spring of 1987, and attended by more than three hundred people. Editorial practice in introducing collections such as these is often simply to state their provenance in this or that conference, and thereafter to treat the collection as a self-standing volume, avoiding further mention of the event which brought the contributors together in the first place. I would like to depart from that custom, and to start by reflecting on the context in which the International Oracy Convention was convened, since the issues raised in the chapters which follow are all, in their various ways, responses to that context.

Broadly stated, that context is the prominence which oracy has achieved on educational agendas over the past few years. In Britain, this is reflected in unprecedented activity at the level of policy-making, as Frater reports in this book. Similar developments have been taking place in other countries – for example, in the curriculum guidelines produced by various states in Australia and provinces in Canada.

For those involved in language education, these are exciting developments: they have validated the efforts of those who have been working over the past twenty years or more to assert the centrality of talk in education, and reinvigorated the search for ways of giving children a spoken 'voice' in the classroom. At the same time, though, there is a certain amount of consternation: now that oracy has apparently been given the go-ahead, what are we to do about it? Although the oracy movement has been gathering momentum for two decades, its apparently rapid acceleration over the past few years has emphasised not just how much has been gained, but how much is still to be decided and discovered: about the nature of children's spoken language development during the years of schooling; about the role that education might play in that process; about the relationship between talk and learning; and about the aims and aspirations of education for 'oracy'.

This state of affairs has left teachers in a vulnerable position. They are being enjoined in curriculum documents to shoulder new responsibilities for developing

children's spoken as well as written abilities. They are being exhorted to re-examine their practice to accommodate new and negotiable forms of learning through talk. In Britain, they are coming to terms with a new examination system at sixteen-plus which requires them to carry out continuous assessment of students' oral communication, and to renegotiate the relationship between assessment and curriculum according to complex and still provisional guidelines from examining bodies. In undertaking all this they often find themselves acting, too, as unwilling brokers between the various interest groups of the ever-widening constituency to which teachers are held accountable. They may, for instance, have to confront the continuing expectations of a writing-based education, from parents, employers or governors; and they must reconcile the vision of a more open-ended education, based on talk, with a wider framework which is tending towards greater centralisation of the curriculum, clear statements of objectives, and strict accountability for definable educational 'products'.

The present climate as regards oracy could be characterised, therefore, as an exhilarating mixture of excitement and uncertainty. It seemed timely to convene a forum which would bring together as many people as possible with an educational interest in spoken language, to share ideas and work through problems and issues. This book offers only a partial reflection, of course, of the scope and diversity of the Convention itself – not only because of unavoidable restrictions on the number of contributions which could be included, but also because many of the sessions, as befits the theme of oracy, took the form of workshops at which everyone present worked collaboratively, at the invitation of the presenters, to examine language materials and explore ideas. The dynamics of sessions such as these could not easily be transformed into the single authorial 'voice' of a written presentation.

Nevertheless, the collection as a whole reflects many of the preoccupations which were voiced over the four days of the Convention, as well as a flavour of the diversity of these preoccupations. Indeed this diversity is itself a topic to be explored – as Mercer *et al.* point out in this book, it is by no means clear that there is a common project underlying the wide range of activities and initiatives that are taking place under the rubric of 'oracy'. It would, of course, be surprising to find an absolute commonality of aims, since divergent perspectives will be found even in longer-established fields of enquiry. But several of the contributors to the Convention voiced the feeling that, in the case of oracy, some of these differences had yet to be fully articulated, and that there was a need to clarify the educational implications of different perspectives.

One theme which recurs across the chapters in this book is the distinction between oracy as a medium of learning in all subjects, and oracy as a subject in its own right – as a further aspect of language competence which teachers now have an obligation to promote, alongside the traditionally recognised skills of reading and writing. In the remainder of this introductory chapter I shall try to follow through some of the implications of these two views of oracy, drawing together issues raised by the contributors.

Oracy for learning

One current strand in work on oracy places talk at the centre of the learning process. This view, which has a long pedigree in terms of curriculum innovation, had its origins in a critique of classrooms as places where children seemed to be forced to learn with, in effect, one hand tied behind their backs. Studies of classroom interaction showed how the traditional structures of teacher-directed talk often relegated children to the role of passive consumers of knowledge, rather than active learners (see, for example, Barnes 1976; Edwards and Furlong 1978; Mehan 1979). The constraints of teacher-led talk became particularly clear when this was compared with children's pre-school experience of language, and the enormous gains in learning through talk which are made during the first five years of life (see Wells 1981; Tizard and Hughes 1984). Chapter 2 of this book, by Dixon, and Chapter 3, by Frater, chart the emergence of the strong movement in schools to replace the traditional scenario of learning-by-listening with a model of active learning through talk. In the active learning approach, children are invited to engage with their own learning through collaborative exploration of ideas; to research facts, knowledge and opinion, and relate these to their own experience; and to analyse, criticise, challenge and speculate, rather than simply listen and 'absorb'. As Parker notes in Chapter 12, in his discussion of collaborative scripting, this has been from the start a cross-curricular enterprise (though some of its most eloquent spokespersons have been English or language specialists): the opportunities are there in *all* subjects to redress the balance of power and responsibility between teacher and taught.

These general principles of active learning through talk are now well established. Several of the chapters in this book suggest that there is still much to be learned, however, about what talk-for-learning actually looks like, the conditions under which it flourishes, and the criteria that we apply when we make judgements about the educational value of children's talk. Chang and Wells (Chapter 8), in their study of active learning in one Canadian classroom, argue that the learning potential of talk is centrally linked with children's 'ownership' of the task they are engaged in, and this concern is reflected, in different terms and guises, in several of the other contributions. Phillips (Chapter 6) suggests that successful small-group talk occurs when children 'appropriate' the topic and become genuinely involved in shaping and creating knowledge for their own ends. According to Phillips, this kind of talk differs strikingly from those occasions when children are merely following an agenda or topic set by the teacher. He goes on to argue that existing criteria for judging the success of small-group talk often tend, however, to dismiss just those characteristics – such as apparent digressions and absence of explicit logical links – which in his view indicate genuine engagement in the learning process. Barnes (Chapter 4) also expresses concern about approaches to oracy in which the talk becomes tyrannised by the task and dislocated from the real-life experience and purposes of the speakers, while Halligan (Chapter 7) reminds us that children may 'own' the task

in different ways, depending on the relationships that are established and negotiated amongst group members, and their individual perceptions of what is required of them. Finally, the account by Hughes and Cousins (Chapter 9) of Sunnyboy's early adventures in school shows, among other things, how one five-year-old successfully subverted the discourse expectations of the infant classroom by claiming ownership of both talk and task.

Another distinctive feature of many of the chapters is the attention given to what might be called 'informal' talk – the language of stories, anecdotes, chat, rhymes and games. At first sight this might seem surprising in a book which is concerned with learning through language, since, as Mercer *et al.* point out in Chapter 10, it is often assumed that 'educational talk' has, or should aim to have, special properties which set it apart from these seemingly mundane kinds of communication which take place outside the classroom, or in the gaps between the official business of lessons. There has been a strong tradition in educational theorising about talk which places a high value on abstraction and generalisation; on language which transcends local culture, personal experience and particular contexts to achieve a level of (apparently) disinterested, rational debate about ideas and propositions. As a result, the everyday genres of anecdotes, stories, jokes or chat – rooted as they are in personal viewpoints and immediate concerns – have often been regarded as disposable language, at least as far as the serious business of learning is concerned. The strength of the boundaries which we build around educational discourse is visible in the lengths to which we go to protect it from 'contamination' by these disorderly vernacular voices: we apologise in seminars for being anecdotal; as teachers we often fear that learning through small-group talk will be subverted if students don't stick to the point, or 'lapse' into desultory chat when our backs are turned. These fears, and the assumptions they embody about the special nature of talk-for-learning, have become institutionalised in large-scale research projects such as those by Bennett (1976) and the ORACLE team (Galton *et al.* 1980), in which teacher effectiveness and pupil progress are judged partly by the extent to which pupils keep their talk 'on task' and avoid straying from the official agenda of the lesson.

From a variety of perspectives, contributors to this book suggest that we need to rethink the boundaries which have been erected around 'educationally relevant' talk, to exclude the informal genres of everyday life from serious consideration in terms of their significance for learning. Rosen emphasises in Chapter 1 the centrality of oral narratives of all kinds, as powerful devices for making sense of experience – a point which is echoed in the observations by Hughes and Cousins about the importance of story-telling among five-year-olds, not just for its entertainment value, but as a means of reflecting on, shaping and bringing together aspects of their experience. Berrill, like Rosen, challenges (in Chapter 5) the traditional demarcations which have separated narrative off from other genres of speech, and which have overlooked the extent to which narrative tends, in Rosen's words, to get 'woven seamlessly' into many different kinds of discourse. Looking at the status of anecdotes in group discussions

among sixteen-year-olds, Berrill suggests that these need not be seen, as they often have in the past, as unskilled and unwelcome intrusions into the realms of abstract argumentation. In the discussions she observed, anecdotes were used productively as a method of developing and sustaining argument itself, by building collaboratively towards generalisations which nevertheless remained grounded in the experiences of the participants.

The contributions by Grugeon (Chapter 13) and van Peer (Chapter 14) extend the educational focus on talk well beyond the official agendas of classroom learning, to look at children's rhymes and games – those oral genres which are so essentially bound up with the culture of childhood that they almost fade from our memories when we make the transition to adulthood, yet which continue to flourish virtually unnoticed by parents and teachers. Both authors suggest that, far from being trivial, these playful language activities are occasions for a great deal of learning, under conditions which are organised and continuously re-created by the children themselves. In their rhymes and games children may be reflecting upon their status *vis-à-vis* the adult world into which they are being inducted; working out for themselves the transition from an oral to a literate culture; negotiating new and shared identities; and building strategies of defence against dominant groups.

As far as oracy for learning is concerned, therefore, at least two themes emerge from the chapters in this book: first, that we need a broader conception of what learning through language looks like; and second, that it may be going on in places where we often fail to look.

Oracy as competence

The second strand which recurs in contemporary work is the idea of oracy as a further area of communicative competence which schools have an obligation to promote. Just as in the past teachers have shouldered the main responsibility for teaching children to read and write, they are now held to have a major part to play in teaching them to speak and listen. Or at least, since the picture is complicated by the fact that children can already talk before they start school, and will continue to engage in it throughout their out-of-school lives, that teachers should be able to provide an environment which actively fosters the *further* development of children's spoken language abilities.

This view of oracy as an aspect of communicative competence in its own right is, I think, the one which is most strongly promoted in the recent policy documents to which Frater refers in Chapter 3. In this view, oracy tends to be seen as primarily the concern of English teachers and language specialists; and oral *assessment* means the assessment of oral skills and competences in their own right, rather than as a vehicle or expression of learning in other curriculum subjects.

It is worth noting that this view assumes that schools *can* make a difference (in a positive way, of course) to the development of children's oral abilities. Although