1. What is it?
Oracy is the ability to use spoken language well. The overall aim of oracy skills development is to ensure students are able to make themselves understood and understand others in spoken interaction, both inside and outside the classroom. This, in turn, leads to more effective learning. There are two spheres of oracy skills development, learning to talk and learning through talk.

How are oracy skills related to speaking and listening skills?
In the language classroom we give students many opportunities to speak, often to generate ideas or to practise new language. Learning to talk builds on this by ensuring students know how to talk effectively. Learning through talk is what happens when spoken interaction results in new insights, clearer understanding, and learning.

In order to develop oracy skills, students need to do more than simply express and process language as individual speakers and listeners; they also need to learn the participatory skills of effective oral communication and interaction.

Key skills
There are four key strands of oracy skills:

- Physical
  This refers to the effective use of voice and body language. Effective speakers modulate their voices to heighten the effect of their message, as well as use a variety of gestures, expressions, and postures to get their message across and ensure it is understood by the listener.

- Cognitive
  This refers to how well the speaker is able to make decisions about what to say. It goes beyond planning content; it also involves being able to assess the overall effectiveness of a message while delivering it. For example, cognitive oracy enables a speaker to decide when and what to clarify, and to judge if they are communicating in a rational and reasonable way.

- Linguistic
  This refers to the language content of what a speaker says. Effective speakers use an appropriate range of vocabulary and grammar and also know how to use language techniques, such as rhetorical questions, to give their message greater communicative impact.

- Social and emotional
  This refers to how well we are able to use spoken language to build relationships with others. It requires good collaborative skills in addition to tact, empathy, and sensitivity. It shows itself in how self-confident someone is when speaking, but also in whether or not they are able to notice how the other people involved in the interaction might be feeling.

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Oracy skills in action

Oracy expert Neil Mercer offers exploratory talk as an example of oracy skills in action. The aim of exploratory talk is to shape a variety of individual opinions into a class consensus through discussion. Achieving the group objective requires the oracy skills of active and empathic listening, a willingness to compromise, and the ability to negotiate.

Exploratory talk can generate interthinking, which is Mercer’s term to describe how new ideas and insights can come through collaborative oral discussions. Students only get so far by exploring their ideas individually. The act of explaining ideas to a partner often sharpens them; and getting feedback on those ideas can help to refine them further or even transform them. Sometimes, new and improved ideas result when partners with good oracy skills collaborate in this way.

Essential workplace skills

To thrive in many 21st century workplaces, oracy skills are invaluable. Employers increasingly seek people with the ability to work collaboratively on team projects, deliver presentations, and find creative solutions to problems.

2. What does it mean for the ELT classroom?

Collaborative learning

Students who think together, learn together. Oracy work in pairs or small groups is more than just practice; it is a valuable opportunity for collaborative peer teaching and learning. Sharing ideas not only improves students’ ability to gather and articulate their own thoughts, it also leads to better understanding and better ideas.

Deeper communication

Good oracy skills help students communicate more effectively and therefore engage more deeply with concepts and ideas. When engaging in a classroom debate, for example, it is important that students are able to explore all possibilities, support their ideas with reasons, and listen carefully to each other. Similarly, when preparing for a classroom presentation, students are more likely to be successful when they have effectively discussed their ideas and created a shared understanding.

Integrating oracy into speaking and listening activities

Oracy skills are a natural extension of the speaking and listening skills we already teach in the language classroom, adding further value. Rules for considerate speaking and listening can be agreed with the class at the start of the course and used as reminders for how to communicate well. Before particular activities, students can explore which oracy skills will help them to communicate successfully, such as how to show empathy in a role-play, or how to add emphasis to a point in a debate. Students can also be guided to reflect on their performance in terms of both language and oracy. After a presentation, for example, students could reflect on how well their message was received. Such reflection will ensure students get the most out of their classroom speaking practice.

Transferable skills

Oracy skills are transferable across languages, which means that the oracy skills students develop in their English lessons can also be applied to other subjects and languages they learn. Similarly, students can be encouraged to think about how the oracy skills they use in their first language can be applied in English.

Giving students a voice

A focus on oracy can be empowering for students, as it enables them to have their voices heard. When students feel they are being listened to in class, the benefits are significant: enhanced wellbeing, improved confidence, greater engagement, and a stronger sense of agency.

3. What are the challenges?

A respectful classroom

Schools are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of oracy, although some challenges remain. Lessons in which there is a lot of constructive talk can be noisy and may be challenging for teachers with large classes to manage. It is essential to agree certain rules with students beforehand, such as what is an appropriate level of noise and how they can be respectful of those around them.

Timing

One of the challenges of oracy work is that it involves a wide variety of speaking skills and types of discourse, some of which students might not be familiar with. In addition, certain exams necessitate a greater focus on reading and writing. Teachers in some contexts may worry that, with their limited contact time, there simply isn’t time to teach oracy skills. However, oracy skills do not require separate lessons and can be integrated into all skills work, including reading and writing – for example, when students generate ideas and respond personally to texts.

Monitoring learning

Whole-class activities involving simultaneous small-group discussions can provide excellent practice opportunities. The teacher is unable to monitor everything that is said in the classroom, so gathering feedback from different students in each lesson and listening carefully when students engage in self-reflection is key.

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4. How can this be implemented?

Creating time and space
Teachers can establish a culture of oracy in class by opening up the lesson to questions and comments from students wherever possible, and by welcoming their responses. Oracy does not have to be confined to those activities of the lesson marked speaking and listening. We can also give students the opportunity to talk, share their ideas, listen to each other, and collaborate on learning tasks at various stages of the lesson – for example, when brainstorming ideas for a writing task, when discussing answers to reading comprehension questions, or discussing a grammar task. Making use of the classroom space is also important. Wherever possible, encourage students to interact in a more comfortable way, away from their desks.

Communicating goals
Oracy can be integrated into every lesson, either at the heart of all classroom interaction by beginning or ending activities with some oral interaction or oracy skills input, or by having a designated section in each lesson to focus on oracy. Whatever the approach, it is important for teachers to communicate their goals to students, and to make sure that students know when oracy is being focused on, which oracy skills are being developed, and how. That way, students can take ownership of their own progress.

Modelling good oracy skills
Teachers are excellent role models, particularly in the way they use language to communicate. Teachers naturally use oracy techniques whenever they give instructions, explain tasks, frame questions, facilitate discussions or debates, handle conflict, or strive to reach consensus after a discussion, and students can be primed to pay attention to these techniques. For example, ask students to notice where you look when someone is talking to you, or how you use gestures to help set up a task.

Signposting the language of oracy
Teachers should use oracy terminology when setting up tasks and giving feedback. For example, when setting up a discussion task, remind students that turn-taking is important when working with others, and point out that this is an aspect of social and emotional oracy. The teacher could also elicit phrases and expressions for taking turns, pointing out that having a collection of useful phrases to use increases students’ linguistic oracy. Signposting the terminology not only helps students to remain consciously aware of oracy, but it also helps them to focus on the specific skills they need to practice.

Classroom routines
Think-Pair-Share
Think-Pair-Share is a framework for collaboration that helps to promote interthinking. Students are first given time to think about a topic, question, or prompt on their own, making notes if appropriate. Next, pairs discuss their thoughts and ideas in an exploratory way. Finally, selected pairs share their ideas with the rest of the class.

Talking points
Groups are provided with a statement or opinion and asked to explore the topic through exploratory talk. For example, on the topic of school, the statements might be ‘School should be optional’ or ‘The school day should start after lunch’. Students should also be encouraged to show curiosity about each other’s views, tolerance of different opinions, willingness to refine or develop their ideas through discussion, and an interest in finding a group consensus.
5. Over to you

Try a step-by-step approach by integrating oracy work with language skills. Teach simple strategies and then build them into your classroom routines. Once students find their voice, the benefits of oracy work will be evident: greater confidence, improved motivation, better performance, and deeper understanding.

Talking points

- How is developing oracy different to teaching speaking and listening?
- Which aspect of oracy do you feel would be most challenging for you to focus on: physical, linguistic, cognitive, or social and emotional?
- How do you think your students would respond to learning oracy skills?
- Can you focus on oracy skills with lower-level classes? What additional challenges might you face?
- Are there any changes you could make to your classroom seating arrangements to make oracy skills practice more effective?
- What are some of the main obstacles to developing oracy skills that you anticipate finding in your context? How might you deal with them?

6. Further reading

Thinking Together Project
https://thinkingtogether.educ.cam.ac.uk

Oracy: The state of speaking in our schools

Oracy Cambridge
https://oracycambridge.org

Voice 21 (a UK charity for oracy education)
https://www.voice21.org

What is Oracy?
https://www.esu.org/oracy

Endnotes
1 Millard & Menzies (2016)
2 Mercer, Thinking Together

Acknowledgements
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