


Making the voice matter in English Studies Teaching

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ABSTRACT

This introduction frames the guest edition of the journal on ‘Oracy and English Studies’. The pieces in this special forum explore how a renewed focus on speaking can re-imagine what it means to ‘do English’. We are two university-level teachers, one from Classics, one from English, eager to explore the potential of this idea. We have brought together a series of short provocations from leading UK-based practitioners both within and beyond the subject area: including a speech-writer, university teachers of Shakespeare and contemporary poetry, charity leaders, and political communication specialists. Their pieces reflect on classroom practices including reading aloud and vocalization, impersonation, the analysis of political speeches and argumentation, or getting students to interrogate their attitudes to their own voices. In each case, our contributors have been asked to respond to the concept from educational theory known as ‘oracy’ (simply put, ‘listening and speaking skills’). English studies clearly need to grapple with this suddenly ubiquitous concept. Not just for its political resonances, but because it is rich in implications for teachers of English at all levels, and deserves greater recognition and interrogation beyond the world of education.

‘The voice is currently a niche area of study’, lamented literary historian Jennifer Richards in the conclusion to her award-winning *Voices and Books in the English Renaissance* (2019), ‘although it matters to many different disciplines, and it should matter to many more’.¹ One of those disciplines is English studies. Those of us who care about the subject should be paying more attention to the voice, not just for its intellectual importance but because of the practical benefits that a sharper classroom focus on speaking could bring at a moment of deep anxiety about the future of the subject. At the time of writing in mid-2023, English is weathering another of its perennial seasons of ‘crisis’. Declining enrolments at secondary and tertiary levels, political assaults on the subject’s value, rapidly changing student expectations,

¹ Jennifer Richards, *Voices and Books in the English Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 283.

and challenges from AI: all have left the subject grappling for ways to adapt, reframe, and defend itself. Multiple remedies are being suggested. Salvation is variously seen to lie in ridding the discipline of its 'colonial' biases, in rethinking the materials we teach, or in approaching anew how we talk about the skills the subject offers.

One idea that brings several of these remedies together is the belief that English studies need to make voice matter more. The spoken word is by no means marginal to modern humanities teaching. After all, when we study language or literature, we often simply go into a room and talk about texts together. But the subject has become more and more focused on the written word and forgetful of speech. In school and college classrooms, educators devote enormous energy to reflection on written texts, whereas spoken language is seen as ephemeral. Students are encouraged to take pride in harnessing written fluency. In contrast, their journey as speakers is neglected, with oral fluency something that happens automatically, not seen as requiring the kind of formalized attention writing receives. By making reflective talk the medium through which we learn and assess, we can transform learning. By placing spoken expression on a more equal footing with written texts, we can engage the passions of new groups of students and unsettle Western values about print. By turning our attention in a serious way to how we use and think about our voices and ears, we can help students develop their communicative resources as thinkers, listeners, and speaking citizens.

The pieces in this special forum explore how a renewed focus on speaking can re-imagine what it means to 'do English'. We are two university-level teachers, one from Classics, one from English, eager to explore the potential of this idea. We have brought together a series of short provocations from leading UK-based practitioners both within and beyond the subject area: including a speech-writer, university teachers of Shakespeare and contemporary poetry, charity leaders, and political communication specialists. Their pieces reflect on classroom practices including reading aloud and vocalization, impersonation, the analysis of political speeches and argumentation, or getting students to interrogate their attitudes to their own voices.

In each case, our contributors have been asked to respond to the concept from educational theory known as 'oracy' (simply put, 'listening and speaking skills'). At the time of writing in the summer of 2023, the word has suddenly catapulted into public consciousness in the UK, following the adoption by the opposition Labour Party of 'oracy' as a key plank of their education policy for the forthcoming British general election.² English studies clearly need to grapple with this suddenly ubiquitous concept. Not just for its political resonances, but because it is rich in implications for teachers of English at all levels, and deserves greater recognition and interrogation beyond the world of education. For the most part, the focus in these pieces is on tertiary- and secondary-level teaching. Though the examples are drawn from the history and current context of British education, there are clear parallels for the international context of English Studies as it addresses current crises.

THE 'ORACY' MOVEMENT AND PROJECTS OF NOTE

'Oracy' is a small word with large social and political ambitions. Derived from Latin, *os*, *oris*, meaning mouth, this neologism was created in 1965 by British educational researcher Andrew Wilkinson who began from the position that 'the spoken language in England has been shamefully neglected'.³ 'It was indicative', he maintained, 'of the unimportant part

² The policy was first announced in Steven Swinford and Nicola Woolcock, 'Sir Keir Starmer Wants Speaking Lessons for all Pupils', *The Times*, 5 July 2023. <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/keir-starmer-labour-policy-national-curriculum-8bfc3h6x>> [accessed 2 October 2023].

³ Andrew Wilkinson, 'The Concept of Oracy', *English in Education*, 2.A2 (1965), 3–5 (p. 3). This formulation also appears in Andrew Wilkinson, 'Influences on Oracy', *Educational Review*, 17.4 (1965), 40–57.

played by the “orate” skills in thinking about education in the past that no such term existed.⁴ He chose his new term as a companion concept to literacy, to provide a new framework for talking about oral skills which encompassed dual capability. Just as to acknowledge someone’s ‘literacy’ was to indicate skills in both reading and writing, ‘oracy’ was intended to refer to skills in not just speaking but also listening. This distinction was important. It crucially marked the concept off from older ideas like ‘eloquence’ or even ‘articulacy’, both of which expressed judgements primarily about an individual’s performance capacity or ability to produce spoken language. Oracy was intended instead to prompt thinking about more holistic ideas about spoken dialogue, conversation, and interlocution.

Wilkinson’s generation of educationalists took their cue in part from the Russian social psychologist Lev Vygotsky’s claims that ‘human learning is specifically social in nature’.⁵ What became the oracy movement undertook research to explore the claim that speaking and listening are essential in organizing thoughts and extending thinking: a key motto was that ‘learning floats on a sea of talk’.⁶ By the 1980s the pedagogy had been road-tested in a number of UK schools through a National Oracy Project led by figures such as Alan Howe and Douglas Barnes.⁷ Their research showed that language skills are the most consistent predictor of future academic and social skill levels and they advocated for greater presence for oracy across the curriculum. But though it was acknowledged in the UK National Curriculum of 1991, it still languished as an obscure idea.

Since the turn of the century, the fortunes of oracy have risen and is now one of the most eagerly debated ideas in British educational theory. A large body of recent research has provided support for the ‘socio-cultural’ model of cognitive development that Vygotsky and Wilkinson proposed.⁸ Most prominent has been Neil Mercer’s work into the ‘joint creation of knowledge’, focusing on a vision of oracy as ‘the ability to articulate collaborative reasoning processes’.⁹ In 2019, the Oracy Cambridge research group of Mercer worked together with the charity Voice 21 to create the *Oracy Skills Framework*, a resource for use in schools centred around a brisk taxonomy of the ‘various skills young people need to develop to deal with a range of different talk situations’, breaking down these aptitudes into four categories: physical (voice, body language); linguistic (vocabulary, language, rhetorical techniques); cognitive (content, structure, clarifying, summarizing, self-regulation, reasoning); and social/emotional (working with others, listening and responding, confidence in speaking, audience awareness). Members of the Oracy Cambridge research centre work closely with the Cambridge Educational Dialogue research group, based at the Faculty of Education, led by Professor Sara Hennessy in collaboration with Rupert Wegerif. This group focuses on developing dialogic education theory, methodology, and practice through researching dialogue across diverse classroom settings: both between the teacher and the students and between students, across subject areas and age groups, and across cultural settings. It aims to develop and test relevant methodological approaches for different settings and research purposes.

⁴ Andrew M. Wilkinson et al., *Spoken English Illuminated* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, 1965), p. 7.

⁵ Lev Vygotsky, ‘Thinking and Speech’, in *The Collected Works of L.S. Vygotsky*, ed. by R. W. Rieber and A. S. Carton, trans. by Norris Minick (New York: Plenum Press, 1987), I, pp. 37–285 (p. 39).

⁶ See Douglas Barnes, *From Communication to Curriculum* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1976).

⁷ See John Johnson, ‘The National Oracy Project’, in *Teaching English*, ed. by Susan Brindley (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 33–42.

⁸ Robin J. Alexander, *Culture and Pedagogy: International Comparisons in Primary Education* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001); Bert van Oers et al., ‘Educational Dialogues and the Fostering of Pupils’ Independence: The Practices of Two Teachers’, *Curriculum Studies*, 42 (2010), 99–121; Neil Mercer and Christine Howe, ‘Explaining the Dialogic Processes of Teaching and Learning: The Value and Potential of Sociocultural Theory’, *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, 1 (2012), 12–21.

⁹ Mercer’s career is surveyed in the pieces in Neil Mercer, *Language and the Joint Creation of Knowledge: The Selected Works of Neil Mercer* (London: Routledge, 2019).

The adoption of oracy by Labour in 2023 draws on this scholarship. But it also draws on the advocacy of a range of institutions and non-governmental groups. In 2012, former key adviser to New Labour Peter Hyman co-founded London's School 21 and the oracy charity Voice 21, with the aim of 'elevating speaking to the same status as reading and writing' which he saw as 'a moral cause – a route to social mobility'.¹⁰ An All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Oracy was launched in 2018 to lobby policymakers directly and published its report following a national inquiry *Speak for Change* (2021).¹¹ Holmes-Henderson collaborated with the Oracy APPG on this inquiry and report, working as an academic expert with funding from the University of Oxford's Policy Engagement Network. This collaboration continues with a British Academy Innovation Fellowship in which Holmes-Henderson and Voice 21 (the APPG's secretariat) are partners on a two-year project (2022–2024), 'Levelling up through talk: how does oracy contribute to social mobility and employability?'. At a time when the discipline of English Studies, and the Humanities in general, are under attack for being 'low value' and for limiting future earning potential, exploring the link between oracy and employability is vital.¹²

As two editors of this forum, we have prioritized an interdisciplinary approach to the oracy movement since 2020 through our Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project *Speaking Citizens*, which has brought historical and social science perspectives to bear on the concept of oracy, hosting conferences and with major publications in train.¹³ We retain strong and fruitful links with adjacent projects in this field which add complementary insights to our work. For example, the Accent Bias in Britain project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council surveyed attitudes to thirty-eight different accents, and conducted more detailed research on five specific accents: Received Pronunciation, Estuary English, Multicultural London English, General Northern English, and Urban West Yorkshire English.¹⁴ It found that whilst accent bias remains pervasive in the UK, under certain conditions, people in positions of power have the capacity to resist accent discrimination.

At a local level, the Durham-led 'Shy bairns get nowt' project seeks to make the voice matter.¹⁵ Classics, Education, English, and Psychology professors are working together, from distinctive disciplinary perspectives, to support the teaching of oracy in primary and secondary schools in North East England. The North East experiences the greatest socio-economic disadvantage in England, with students in the region falling twice as far behind their peers in London during the pandemic. This collaborative project (with input from experts in Norway, Spain, Slovenia,

¹⁰ Qtd in Pete Henshaw, 'Neglecting Oracy Skills "hampers jobs prospects and social mobility"', *Sec-Ed*, 9 November 2016. <<https://www.sec-ed.co.uk/content/news/neglecting-oracy-skills-hampers-job-prospects-and-social-mobility>> [accessed 2 October 2023]; For recent social mobility arguments for oracy using the concept of the inarticulate, see Lyn Dawes, 'Our Class', *Oracy Cambridge*, 22 September 2022. <<https://oracycambridge.org/our-class>> [accessed 30 March 2023].

¹¹ Publications related to this growing role for oracy include the All Party Parliamentary Group report *Speak For Change* (2021) <https://oracy.inparliament.uk/files/oracy/2021-04/Oracy_APPG_FinalReport_28_04%20%284%29.pdf> [accessed 2 October 2023]; and *Speaking Frankly: The Case for Oracy in the Curriculum* (London: The English Speaking Union and Oracy 21, 2019). See also Alice Stott and Amy Gaunt, *Transform Teaching and Learning Through Talk: The Oracy Imperative* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2018).

¹² Prime Minister Rishi Sunak made a controversial announcement regarding the centrality of Maths to the curriculum in England, 'In Germany, France, Asia, youngsters are studying maths all the way to 18 and in the way a modern economy works, I think it's going to hold us back if our youngsters don't have those skills', qtd in Sophie Wingate, 'Sunak Vows to Crack Down on University Degrees with Low Outcomes', *Independent*, 6 August 2022. <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/higher-education-liz-truss-winchester-college-russell-group-british-b2139918.html>> [accessed 2 October 2023].

¹³ Findings from our project will be published as *Oracy: The Politics of Speech Education*, ed. by Tom F. Wright (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024); See also Arlene Holmes-Henderson et al., 'Rhetoric, Oracy and Citizenship: Curricular Innovations from Scotland, Slovenia and Norway', *Literacy*, 53 (2022), 253–63.

¹⁴ For full details see Erez Levon, Devyani Sharma, Dominic Watt, and Christina Perry, *Accent Bias in Britain Attitudes to Accents in Britain and Implications for Fair Access* (London: Queen Mary University of London & The University of York, 2020).

¹⁵ For further details, see <<https://www.durham.ac.uk/news-events/latest-news/2023/05/shy-bairns-get-nowt/>> [accessed 29 September 2023].

Poland, and the USA) will co-produce classroom resources with teachers to support both teachers and students to use their voices with confidence and to develop critical active listening skills.

Since ancient times, it has been clear that a link exists between the effective and empowered use of voice and political participation. The Gender Empowerment through Politics in Classrooms (G-EPIC) research project develops and tests methods that support disadvantaged girls to gain confidence in their voices and engage in politics. This three-year international comparative research project (2023–2026) in six countries (Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Germany, Spain, and the UK) is designing strategies, regulations, and policies that are conducive to a more equitable gender-political involvement, particularly of girls with a disadvantaged background. A team of researchers led by Professor Bryony Hoskins in the UK (Roehampton University) will create a toolbox to act as an international reference of best practices to foster gender equity in politics from the classroom and beyond, boosting more girls to get involved in politics when they reach adulthood.

It is encouraging to see the British Academy funding further projects which prioritize research into oracy. If colleagues in English Studies have doubts about the relevance and status of oracy as a field of study, they ought to be encouraged by Dr Alison Chisholm's Innovation Fellowship (awarded 2023) 'Citizens' voices making change: Enhancing the impact and legacy of citizens' assemblies and citizens' juries to tackle health inequalities and climate change'.¹⁶ Oracy underpins successful deliberative processes and, if prioritized in education, 'could strengthen democracy in future' (Chisholm). By working in partnership with Involve, the UK's public participation charity, Dr Chisholm will explore ways to make people's voices matter and to put citizens at the heart of decision-making.

Much work to date has focused on school-level teaching. Though oracy is becoming a common feature in the practical and conceptual toolkit of schoolteachers, it has been slow to move onto the radar of university educators.¹⁷ Globally this is far from the norm. The international context presents us with a range of models for how speaking and listening might be embraced in the tertiary curriculum. In European liberal arts models, it is part of the undergraduate curriculum, just as it is for North American colleges, where rhetorical traditions remain prominent.

The outcome of all of this energy is that oracy seems to be enjoying something of a moment. But even though it is returning to the educational policy conversation, the oracy movement still faces considerable challenges. One of the chief roadblocks is the widespread belief that oracy is merely a recent fad. The prevailing official narrative of the UK government over the last decade has been that oracy simply is not traditional. Successive leaders have made it part of a culture war between progressive and traditional education. In 2013, Education Secretary Michael Gove dismissed 'new-fangled' ideas such as oracy as 'in practice, children chatting to each other'.¹⁸ In a similar spirit, the Schools Minister Nick Gibb repeated the distinction in 2017 between 'traditional methods' and 'seductive sounding [...] child-centred approaches'.¹⁹

¹⁶ For more details, see <<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/funding/innovation-fellowships-scheme-route-a-researcher-led/innovation-fellowships-scheme-route-a-past-awards/innovation-fellowships-scheme-2022-23-route-a-researcher-led-awards/>> [accessed 29 September 2023].

¹⁷ The British Council has sponsored research into the experience of language learners, and the English as Foreign Language and English for Academic Purposes subjects, which naturally have a closer relationship to the spoken word. See Catherine Doherty, Margaret Kettle, Lyn May, and Emma Caukill 'Talking the Talk: Oracy Demands in First Year University Assessment Tasks', *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 18 (2011) 27–39; Marion Heron, 'Making the Case for Oracy Skills in Higher Education: Practices and Opportunities', *Journal of University Teaching and Practice*, 16.2 (2019); Heron also organized a conference on the subject of oracy in HE at the University of Surrey in 2019; Louise Palmour and Jill Doubleday, *Facilitating Oral Skills Development: A Guide for Practitioners in Higher Education* (London: British Council, 2020).

¹⁸ Michael Gove, 'The Importance of Teaching', Speech to Policy Exchange, 2013. <<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/michael-gove-speaks-about-the-importance-of-teaching>> [accessed 2 October 2023].

¹⁹ Nick Gibb, 'The Evidence in Favour of Teacher-Led Instruction', Speech to Education World Forum, 2017. <<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/nick-gibb-the-evidence-in-favour-of-teacher-led-instruction>> [accessed 2 October 2023].

However, the attempt to focus on improving levels of spoken communication is a fundamental impulse that has travelled under many names through centuries. And such an impulse has played a key role in the origins of English Studies itself.

ORACY AND THE ORIGINS OF ENGLISH STUDIES

We can see forms of oracy in the history of the subject most clearly in two traditions from which modern English studies emerged. The first is the elocutionary tradition.²⁰ A focus on what Classical theorists such as Cicero and Quintilian called *actio*, or the delivery of speeches and performances, had a long history in schooling. But under the name ‘elocution’ it became particularly important in British society in the middle of the eighteenth century, when figures such as Irish actor Thomas Sheridan and English counterpart John Walker became famous for their manuals and public lectures on voice, gesture, and delivery. Like with oracy today it was understood in political terms. Sheridan’s tract *British Education* (1756) saw a revival of ‘the long lost art of oratory’ as a way of correcting national ‘evils’ and proposed elocution as a means for the regeneration of society.²¹ For a century and a half, elocution was a truly popular cross-class phenomenon, as much a matter of mechanics institutes as drawing rooms. Crucially, this phenomenon had literature at its heart because elocutionary readings were primarily drawn from poetic and other literary texts. This was a world of autodidacts who worked privately through anthologies or attended public recitations.²² But it also became a formal element in a wide range of schools and a core part of the university curriculum. Modern literature therefore first entered the school curriculum as a vehicle for training the voice. The subject we recognize today found its feet as an educational model based on recitation, memorization, and declamation.

Second, and more important institutionally, English studies emerged from the focus on spoken arguments and debate found in the rhetorical tradition.²³ Rhetoric is one of the oldest school subjects and its influence is difficult to overstate. The familiarity of elite schoolchildren with Classical traditions of argument provides a common educational thread through the cadences of Shakespeare, the arguments of Locke, to the speechmaking of Victorian politicians from William Gladstone to Emmeline Pankhurst. It also occupied a prominent place in the collegiate tradition, most notably the ancient universities of the Scottish Enlightenment which helped play a role in democratizing rhetorical education so that, like elocution, it was a subject that had its own mass appeal. This tradition notably flourished in the universities of North America well into the twentieth century.

However, as several contributors to this forum note, rhetoric rapidly declined at just the high-Victorian moment at which ‘English literature’ was established as its own subject. In some senses, one could argue that rhetoric passed its cultural role within modern education to the humanizing powers of literary study. The Arnoldian principle of ‘the best that has been thought and said’ replaced a preoccupation with the best way to *say* things. What that meant in practice for British education was that rhetoric became the preserve of the elite.

²⁰ The discussion in this section is indebted to Thomas P. Miller, ‘Where Did College English Studies Come From?’, *Rhetoric Review*, 9 (1990), 50–69; and William Riley Parker, ‘Where Do English Departments Come From?’, *College English*, 28.5 (1967), 339–51.

²¹ Thomas Sheridan, *British Education: Or, The Source of the Disorders of Great Britain* (Dublin: R. and J. Dodsley, 1756), p. 3; *The Nineteenth-Century History of English Studies*, ed. by Alan Bacon (London: Routledge, 1998).

²² For a survey of the elocutionary movement see Paul Goring, ‘The Elocutionary Movement in Britain’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Rhetorical Studies*, ed. by Michael J. MacDonald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) pp. 559–68. See also Philippa M. Spoel, ‘Rereading the Elocutionists: The Rhetoric of Thomas Sheridan’s *A Course of Lectures on Elocution* and John Walker’s *Elements of Elocution*’, *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, 19 (2001), 49–91.

²³ For a synthesis of the relationship of rhetoric to English Studies, see Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987).

Whereas the Newcastle Report of 1861 into ‘the state of popular education in England’ noted no significant role for rhetoric or elocution in state elementary schools, its successor the Clarendon Report (1864) into teaching in the British public schools commended the widespread teaching of dialogues, speeches, and other recitations before audiences both of fellow schoolchildren and the public.²⁴ As Simon Kuper found in his recent book *Chums* (2021), the ‘outsized role of rhetoric survives’ in such institutions along with the direct encouragement of speechmaking and debate.²⁵ The result is that, as Iranga Tcheko, a public speaking mentor from East London put it in a recent BBC documentary, ‘it’s usually posh schools that have debating teams.’²⁶

These two traditions offered up two ways of valuing the voice: the esthetic voice of the elocutionists; and the oratorical voice of the rhetorician. As the study of literature became the centre of gravity, it is easy to see why both fell from favour. Those who saw analysis of texts and literary tradition as more important in the classroom understandably pushed back against what they saw as the surface fixation with the voice. Those with a more democratic vision for education were also no doubt right to reject the normative judgements about accent, delivery, or style that underpinned elocution. Yet the ambition to shape how students speak never entirely left the subject. In perhaps the most influential document for the subject in the twentieth century, the Newbolt Report (1921), the aim ‘to give its pupils speech [...] to make them articulate and civilized human beings’ was made central, as was the ambition to counter ‘evil habits of speech contracted in home and street.’²⁷ Similarly, the seminal ‘Dartmouth Conference’ or ‘Anglo-American Seminar on the Teaching of English’ in 1966 also retained a prominent place for creativity through speech. Most recently, in the 2019 QAA Benchmark Statements on English, the vocal dimension to the subject is acknowledged once again in the claim that ‘what characterizes English as a subject is critical attention to the spoken and written word’.²⁸

Needless to say, there is no agreement among researchers or practitioners about how a new focus on speaking will work in practice. Those who advocate for a greater role for speaking skills are accused of perpetuating racial and class biases – merely rehashing Sheridan’s fear of accent variation or Newbolt’s 1920s prejudice against ‘evil habits of speech contracted in home and street.’²⁹ Others note that a return to speaking can have harmful effects on the well-being and outcomes of resistant students. More broadly, contemporary British society seems deeply confused about its attitudes to the kinds of articulacy the subject of English can bring. On the one hand, *Times* columnist Jane Shilling voiced a widespread view in the *Times* in 2003 when she argued that the kinds of ‘articulacy’ promoted by the subject of English ‘is a form of subversion, which is why people in authority find themselves in such difficulties over it. The act of introducing a child to conversation is like the Tree of Knowledge [...] lots of consequences follow’.³⁰ More recent is the argument that students in English studies are not just too eloquent for their own good but that their articulacy is economically harmful.

²⁴ [Duke of Newcastle], *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the State of Popular Education in England* (London: HMSO, 1861); [Earl of Clarendon], *Inquiry into the Revenues and Management of Certain Colleges and Schools and the Studies Pursued and Instruction Given Therein* (London: HMSO, 1864).

²⁵ Simon Kuper, *Chums* (London: Profile Books, 2022).

²⁶ BBC Stories, *The Power of Debating*, online video recording, Youtube, 28 April 2018, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nmcVh0seDkU>> [accessed 2 October 2023].

²⁷ Henry Newbolt, *The Teaching of English in England* (London: HMSO, 1921), pp. 60, 59.

²⁸ Qualifications Assessment Agency, ‘Subject Benchmark Statement: English, December 2019’, QAA <https://web.archive.org/web/20210427215040/https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/subject-benchmark-statements/subject-benchmark-statement-english.pdf?sfvrsn=47e2cb81_4> [accessed 2 October 2023].

²⁹ For a summary of these arguments see Ian Cushing, *Standards, Stigma, Surveillance: Raciolinguistic Ideologies and England’s Schools* (London: Palgrave, 2023).

³⁰ Jane Shilling, ‘A Little More Conversation’, *The Times*, 14 November 2003. <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/a-little-more-conversation-8s6bpwb639c>> [accessed 2 October 2023].

In 2020, the influential former government adviser Dominic Cummings notoriously remarked that the UK economy required more STEM students rather than more 'English graduates who chat about Lacan at dinner parties'.³¹ Nonetheless, if the post-AI economy needs new levels of communicative fluency, then making rigorous training in speaking and listening the preserve of only those who can afford private schooling is untenable.

WAYS OF MAKING THE VOICE MATTER

The contributions to this forum offer a series of practical solutions to these impasses. They suggest ways that English studies might re-think its mission, adapt to meet new needs and appetites and rediscover some of the earlier versions of itself that it has renounced. It begins with two contributions from people beyond the subject area in the broad area that might be called political communication. The first is from Alan Finlayson, a specialist in rhetoric who makes the case for a more rhetorical version of English studies. The word rhetoric is 'horribly misunderstood' he laments, associated primarily with trivial outdated pedagogies and public mendacity. But he takes a positive view of the value of placing argument at the heart of humanistic study and thinking about language as political action. English is well placed to do just this, he argues. Rhetoric is the 'road not taken' in English Studies and one route back to greater relevance. Arguing that 'in a strong particular culture, speech and debate are treated seriously', he gives examples from his own practice of teaching political oratory to show how speeches, YouTube and TikTok monologues, and other oral forms might provide a new focus for the subject.

But Stephen Coleman, the next contributor, wants to push this focus on speech even further. Rather than simply analysing forms of speech, he proposes that English might embrace the more fully-fledged interrogation of how, why, and what students say, and attitudes to their voice. Remarkable insights occur when students and teachers allow themselves to think carefully about the spoken word and about how we speak and listen. In what he terms a manifesto for interpersonal communication studies, he proposes an imaginary meeting ground that unites the strengths of communication teaching with the traditions of English Studies. Such an attempt, he notes, would help repair the artificial distinctions between the objects of study and approaches of the two disciplines that took place in the early twentieth century, and help begin the 'hard work of cultivating potent voices' that he sees as the prerequisite for confronting crises in British democracy.

These two external perspectives are balanced by a pair of views from within English Studies itself. First, Jennifer Richards offers a personal account of how thinking about the physical voice has transformed how she conceives the history of reading and the possibilities for a less silent pedagogy. Through her research into early modern writers such as Gabriel Harvey and Thomas Nashe, she has learnt a lot about older attitudes to reading aloud, and about experiments that took place in the Tudor schoolroom around impersonation, persona, and ventriloquism. These have convinced her that engaging with the 'voices' in books does not just make the teaching of literature more dynamic but opens up new ways of cultivating an ethics of empathy in the classroom.

As Peter Howarth argues in the following piece, practices of reading aloud are also particularly valuable for the teaching of contemporary poetry. Oral poetry too often gets 'eclipsed' in the modern curriculum. Amidst exam-centric pressure to taxonomize and enumerate features of poems, the actual experience and excitement of poetry are too often lost. He surveys

³¹ Qtd in Rajeev Syal, 'Dominic Cummings Calls for Weirdos and Misfits', *Guardian*, 2 January 2020. <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/jan/02/dominic-cummings-calls-for-weirdos-and-misfits-for-no-10-jobs>> [accessed 2 October 2023].

current research into how reconnecting to voice can offer new ‘meaning-making journeys’ for students. He reaches back to the role oral poetry played in the Newbolt Report, and in the ‘verse-speaking revival’ in mid-Twentieth Century Britain, to suggest how poetry might be revitalized through a great role for vocalization, and the possibilities for this pedagogy for bringing the risks, vulnerabilities, and unexpected elements of language and performance to the fore.

None of these innovations or disciplinary realignments can occur, of course, without changes to curricula and assessment. If something is not assessed – as speaking is currently not – it is far too easy to disregard. The next two contributions make the case, in different ways, for a return to formalized assessment of speaking. The first comes from former speechwriter and president of the European Speechwriter Network Brian Jenner who makes what he calls ‘a case for a rhetorical education’. He gives his own experience of developing fluency and competence with the spoken word and raises crucial problems with how we think about oracy and its social role. ‘Oracy teaches a person to do sales, to advocate ideas, to persuade people to do new things’, he suggests, but also notes that such oracy is often uncomfortable and even unwelcome in a range of professional and social contexts. It is high time that ‘eloquence and memory’ need to come back to ‘the centre of the curriculum again’. And he suggests that AI may take the decision out of our hands, noting that ‘you soon work out what a student knows when he or she has a question and answer session in front of their peers’.

Making the same argument in a more targeted way, Annabel Thomas-MacGregor and Ameena Khan Sullivan, researchers at the charity English Speaking Union, advocate for a return to formalized end-point assessment in all four nations of the UK from primary through secondary education. They acknowledge the struggle that schools currently must justify the value of oracy and lament the removal of the speaking and listening assessment from GCSE English in 2013. Rather than the assessment of oracy being a loose or unmanageable goal, they suggest, the evidence base of educational research clearly confirms how a focus on specific techniques such as scaffolding, sentence stems, and the use of concepts such as democratic talk and accountable talk can offer proven practical methods. Only by making oracy something assessed and taken seriously at primary and second level, they argue, can British educators ‘offer an education fit for the needs of young people’.

From this forum, readers might be forgiven for thinking that only English Studies can truly make voice matter. But is English really the subject best placed to do this? Our final contributor Amanda Moorghen, Head of Impact and Research at Voice 21, raises the important counterargument that English does not have the monopoly on the creation of articulate youth. Just as it is not the only subject that nurtures critical thinking, it is also not the only subject that allows voices and articulacy to flourish. Oracy is both a generic and a subject-specific skill. By exploring what she calls the idea of ‘disciplinary oracy’ she makes clear that whilst English departments have important contributions to make, the responsibility for nurturing speaking skills is a much broader educational goal. ‘Disciplinary oracy’ she argues ‘offers the possibility of giving students real choice over the ways in which they communicate, and with it, the ways of thinking that they engage in and value’. Moorghen’s call is a useful way to close what is intended as merely the beginning of a much-needed conversation in English Studies about ways in which it can make the voice matter once again.