Key components of a KS4 oral English syllabus:
A discussion paper

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1 Introduction

This paper is organised around headings which emerged from a research meeting at Cambridge Assessment in December 2012. The discussion covered not only the content of the syllabus as a programme of study but also the assessment of learning, so reference is made to both. This paper does not include references to research literature; it is a brief, clear and straightforward document that is designed to stimulate further discussion and action.

2 Level 1: the key concepts / constructs / skills etc (ie high level objectives and content)

The concerns that teachers and government ministers – and often parents – have about the quality of young people's spoken English are usually to do with its 'correctness', meaning the extent to which they use Standard English grammar, avoid slang terms and speak clearly and at an appropriate level (not mumbling or shouting). Concerns are also sometimes expressed about whether they can speak confidently in public, use appropriate technical vocabulary and manage non-verbal aspects of their performance (such as maintaining eye contact with listeners).

Sometimes these concerns are misguided, such as when they condemn the use of local dialects or slang in situations where this usage is perfectly appropriate: for example, by students among their peers. But in general they are not foolish concerns because many aspects of speech performance can determine the effectiveness of someone's communication, both in terms of the clarity of communication and the impression made on a listener. Moreover, young people may not be very self-aware of such aspects of their performance, or be able to modify them at will, even if they felt that it would be useful to do so. These aspects should therefore be taken into account when designing an English syllabus.

For students from EAL backgrounds, teachers and others will have specific concerns about correctness of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, which reflect a student's level of second language learning rather than their awareness of social norms of language use, but it is not necessary to deal directly with these issues here.

However, there are other aspects of spoken language use which are also important for educational attainment and for the development of life skills more generally, which are not often recognised by policy makers and teachers as being a suitable focus for teaching and learning. These are the abilities to take part in formal presentations and debates and to engage in purposeful, reasoned discussion within a group. Formal debates and presentations are commonly described by researchers as requiring 'presentational talk', and collaborative problem solving as requiring 'exploratory talk', but the skills involved are not entirely separate. To perform well in such activities, students need to be able to manage turn-taking, give reasons to support their views, respond to and build upon what others say and talk in ways which engage listeners' attention and emotional involvement. These things could be incorporated within the scope of an English syllabus.

Research evidence supports the view that students of any school age can be taught how to use spoken English more effectively in formal debate and group discussion. Such teaching involves teachers raising students' own critical meta-awareness of how talk is used, as well as modelling ways of using talk, guiding students in new ways of using it and giving them suitable activities to develop and practice their skills. Practical techniques for teaching talk skills and meta-awareness have been identified and tested by researchers, and are already used by some teachers. However, such direct teaching of talk is still a rare

feature of mainstream educational practice. Systematic assessments of the range of students' oral skills are also rarely made.

There is some natural overlap between the 'speaking and listening' component of an English curriculum and the content of a drama curriculum. The development of students' abilities to express emotions appropriately in speech, to adapt register, vocabulary and accents to suit particular circumstances, and engage an audience's interest, can all be assisted through drama activities – and assessed through observing their performance in such activities. It would seem sensible to consider how to handle this overlap in designing an oral English syllabus.

Discussion so far has concentrated on the identification and development of skills in using spoken English. But an English syllabus would also be expected to assist the development of students' understanding *about* spoken English. This would include the study of registers, dialects, accents and any other forms of linguistic variation that are essentially oral rather than written. This would not be only an academic topic, as it would also contribute to the development of students' meta-awareness of how they and others use language, and so assist the development of their language skills.

A necessary requirement for incorporating oral language successfully into the English curriculum is, of course, that teachers have sufficient awareness and understanding of the nature of spoken English and its use, and an appreciation of how its development helps students' learning more generally. English teachers could usefully be informed that developing students' skills in using spoken English for reasoned argument in group-based activities has been found to improve their reading comprehension and written argumentation, as well as their attainment in other subjects, such as maths and science. Teachers also need a practical knowledge of ways of teaching students about talk and developing their skills in using it.

3 Level 2: a more detailed articulation / elaboration of the Level 1 concepts / constructs / skills

There are some basic school-based situations or contexts in which a student can demonstrate their ability to use spoken English; for example:

(1) making a formal presentation about a topic, and / or engaging in a debate, in front of a class or other public audience;

(2) explaining their understanding of a topic (including any problems they might have with it) to another person, such as a peer, teacher or assessor;

(3) working with other students in a group, to solve problems or complete a piece of work;

(4) playing a role in improvised or scripted drama activities.

To use language effectively in these situations, certain skills are required, though not all are necessarily required in every situation. Students need to be able to:

(a) speak clearly and coherently;

(b) use appropriate vocabulary, register and language variety;

(c) take turns with other speakers, so that a balance of voices is heard;

(d) respond sensitively to what others say;

(e) be proactive in seeking information and ideas from others;

(f) show that what others have said has been heard and taken into account;

(g) provide explanations which take account of the limits of common knowledge and understanding shared with their audience;

(h) give reasons to support their views.

For the sake of clarification, though with a risk of oversimplification, the list above can be regarded as involving different types of skills (with some overlap):

- Items (a) and (b) involve linguistic skills, as they depend on a repertoire of appropriate modes of language production and forms of English.

- Items (b), (c), (d), (e) and (f) involve social skills, requiring judgements about which social norms of language use apply in any situation and how to manage interactions.

- Items (f), (g) and (h) involve cognitive skills, as they require critical consideration of the content of what is said, including what knowledge is new or shared with others.

The skills involved could be considered at a more detailed level in terms of the kinds of speech acts and other behaviours which students need to perform appropriately in any given situation. These could form the basis for an assessment of their performance, with specific situations invoking suitable criteria for assessment.

Classroom research carried out a while back, involving KS2 children, generated a list of 14 items, reproduced below, that teachers could focus on while observing how a specific child performed within a group-based activity. This list is included, not because it is a perfect model for such a checklist (arguably there are several reservations about it), but rather to illustrate (a) the range of aspects of a child's use of talk across a variety of situations which are relevant to assessing their level of ability and (b) how assessing oral language ability may involve making interpretative judgements on the basis of observations of how children talk in several situations or contexts. For example, for item 2 an assessor might use observations of how a child behaved non-verbally in a group activity and the content of their response to a teacher's questions to judge how well they could take account of what they had heard.

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1. Does the child initiate and carry on conversations?
2. Does the child listen carefully?
3. Can the child's talk be easily understood?
4. Can the child describe experiences?
5. Can the child give instructions?
6. Does the child follow verbal instructions?
7. Does the child modify talk for different audiences?
8. Does the child ask questions?
9. Does the child give reasons?
10. Does the child ask others for their views?
11. Does the child reply to challenging questions with reasons?
12. Can the child take joint responsibility for decisions?
13. Can the child 'think aloud'?
14. Can the child generate and consider an alternative point of view?

(Dawes, Mercer and Wegerif, 2000)

Students at KS4 level can be expected to show a higher level of talk skills than those at KS2, but members of any GSCE class are likely to vary considerably in their levels of skill and awareness. For example, in relation to item 9 we might hope to see a KS2 child giving reasons to support their view, but we might expect a KS4 student to be giving good reasons.

There is an interesting discussion to be had about how the levels of attainment that could be expected of students of different ages should affect the content of a syllabus and associated assessment criteria. In relation to item 9, for a KS4 student we might be interested in the following specific questions:

- Does the student give reasons to support his / her views?

- Do those reasons draw on relevant experience and knowledge?

- Is relevant vocabulary employed?

- Are the reasons clearly presented and well argued, in a suitable register?

- Does the student show awareness of other points of view?

- Can the student adapt their argument to take account of new information?

4 Summary

1. Some concerns commonly expressed by teachers and policy makers about students' spoken language skills are reasonable, and should inform what is taught in English, but other concerns may be ill-informed. Some important aspects of oracy are not well recognised, or dealt with, as part of mainstream educational practice.
2. Some specific, school-based situations can be related to the development of aspects of students' use of spoken English, for teaching and assessment purposes.
3. An oral English syllabus could be expected to deal with both the development of students' skills in using talk and their understanding of the functional forms and natural variation of spoken English in social contexts.
4. The successful introduction of an oral English syllabus would depend on teachers having the necessary understanding of spoken language and of tried and tested techniques for developing students' oracy skills.

It may be useful to consider the oracy skills students need to learn and develop as being of three types: (a) linguistic, (b) social, (c) cognitive. These can be related to a more detailed specification of what students actually need to do in order to communicate successfully in a range of situations, which could inform assessment procedures.