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**Written evidence:**

This submission is from the English-Speaking Union, a charity working to help young people develop the speaking and listening skills and the cross-cultural understanding they need to thrive.

**Summary**

- Oracy enables students to succeed both at schools and in later life. Therefore there is a social justice imperative to ensure that all young people, not just the most privileged, have the opportunity to develop and demonstrate their oracy skills.
- Oracy education develops the ability to conduct reasoned debate around divisive issues, and to respect the opinions of those with whom you disagree. As such, it equips young people with the tools they need to navigate today's divided political landscape: this includes both cognitive 'skills and knowledge' and social/emotional competencies.
- Students with a wide range of characteristics, in many different settings, have much to gain from oracy education. It should not be reserved for the 'gifted and talented' and the current under-provision of extra-curricular oracy activities in schools serving disadvantaged communities should be addressed.
- Schools and teachers are at the heart of ensuring that every child can access a quality oracy education. Government policy needs to ensure that schools are empowered to prioritise oracy in their work; and both government and expert external providers have a role to play in supporting teachers in developing the professional skills, confidence and networks that they need to deliver quality oracy education.

## **1. The value and impact of quality oracy education on future life chances**

1.1. Oracy impacts upon students' academic outcomes, further education and employment prospects and their ability to play an active part in political and civic life. Therefore, there is a social justice imperative to ensure that all young people, not just the most privileged, have the opportunity to develop and demonstrate their oracy skills. Doing so will help to close the gap between the most and least advantaged in society, enabling all young people to achieve their potential.

1.2. Research shows that students' academic outcomes are positively influenced by oracy education. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)<sup>i</sup> reports that oracy provides the equivalent of five months' progress for a low cost, based on extensive evidence. Oracy education benefits students' learning across the curriculum, including science (Hanley et al. 2015<sup>ii</sup>), maths and reading (Gorard 2015<sup>iii</sup>).

1.3. This is supported by the ESU's own evaluations: a controlled study of KS2 pupils across two schools (n=108) found that pupils who took part in an oracy programme showed

“highly significant gains in a nationally standardised test of non-verbal reasoning compared to others who did not have those opportunities, and did better in achieving/exceeding their interim National Curriculum Key Stage 2 targets over the period.”<sup>iv</sup> A teacher from St Mary’s RC Primary (London) told us: “Talking precedes writing. One of the units we work on is balanced arguments... if they’ve experienced that through [*Discover Debating*] it really holds them in good stead when it comes to their writing.”

1.4. Oracy is crucial for students applying for further/higher education and job opportunities, as these often rely on interviews and presentations to sift candidates. Activities such as debating or Youth Parliament can also bolster students’ UCAS applications. Further, oracy enables young people to thrive in these environments. In further/higher education, oracy is critical for the ability to speak up in seminars, tutorials and group discussions, where at present the most confident prosper at the expense of those who are ill-equipped to take part<sup>v</sup>. In the workplace, oracy enables young people to communicate in or lead meetings, and deliver presentations or pitches. As such, oracy is a sought-after skill by employers<sup>vi</sup>. Jackie, the mother of a recent Schools’ Mace Debating Champion, said “I’ve seen a huge change in my son’s confidence and in his ability to see all sides of an argument. He goes to a state comprehensive in Liverpool but has been offered a place at Oxford. He was able to meet the dons there and talk to them with ease, and I think that debating and the ESU, and his teacher and coach, have done that for him.”

1.5. Oracy empowers young people in political and civic life, whether through directly teaching the skills and knowledge needed (e.g. for campaigning, consultation, meetings etc.); encouraging critical engagement with current affairs; or providing students with direct experience of the benefits of democratic structures, e.g. through student parliaments. This is well-supported by the research evidence, which finds that debating helps students to engage with, and change their mind about, social issues<sup>vii</sup>, and that quality oracy education is a necessary part of teaching and learning about shared values and democratic engagement<sup>viii</sup>.

1.6. The ability to communicate is a vital to active citizenship, especially in regard to the social and emotional competencies needed to handle conflict around strongly held values and beliefs. Civil debate - ‘disagreeing agreeably’ - is especially important where the political landscape is characterised by deep divides and aggressive rhetoric. Research supports<sup>ix</sup> oracy education as a means of teaching these competencies, and this is what the ESU finds in its work. 78% of participants of *Discover Debating* agreed that “Debating has helped me to think about other people’s opinions and ideas”. A teacher from Arbourthorne Community Primary School (Sheffield) reports: “One child... with an aggressive debating style made amazing progress. He wasn’t able to disagree in a mature way and found debating very difficult... He is now able to settle disputes in a calm and assertive manner.” Annabel, a participant of the Schools’ Mace Debating Competition, told us: “Debating teaches us that we can have a really intense argument and still respect the opposition as a person. I really like that.”. Patrick, a Schools’ Mace Debating Champion, told us: “Debating has taught me... there will be an opposing argument to my own and that it’s a credible argument... I think that makes me more appreciative of other people’s views.”

1.7. Oracy can be part of citizenship teaching for all ages: Arbourthorne Community Primary School (Sheffield), which took part in the ESU’s *Discover Debating* programme to develop pupils’ oracy and teachers’ skills, knowledge and confidence, made oracy part of

their charitable drive, “The Even Better Arbourthorne Project”. Students bid for small grants to improve their schools and local community, developing their ideas and presenting them in front of a panel. The winning Year 4 group planned speeches and spoke to the whole school and parents about their concept, as well as presenting their ideas in writing.

## **2. The value and impact of quality oracy education in different settings and on different types of pupils**

2.1 The ESU works with a wide range of young people, in different settings (both in the UK and internationally). This has included work in mainstream, special and alternative provision; young people of low, moderate and high prior attainment; young people from both advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds; young people with special educational needs (SEN); young people with English as an additional language (EAL). We have found that there is benefit to structured, quality oracy education in all of these contexts, and that often, those from the least advantaged backgrounds had the most to gain<sup>x</sup>. Further, quality oracy education has the potential to close participation gaps seen in public speaking/participation in discussions along gendered and ‘racial’ lines<sup>xi</sup>, thus enabling a diverse range of voices to be heard in public life.

2.2. When working outside of mainstream settings the ESU works with teaching staff to ensure the appropriateness of any teaching materials and make any adjustments needed. Having done this, we have found that teachers report benefits for their students. For example, a teacher at The Ashley School, Lowestoft (for children with complex and moderate learning difficulties) said: “[*Discover Debating*] has been a great asset to our children. It is improving their confidence, speaking and social skills. They are learning how to respect one another’s views and feeling able to voice their own opinion in a safe encouraging environment run by a knowledgeable and nurturing tutor.”

2.3. The ESU works with young people of all levels of prior attainment. We have found that oracy activities lend themselves to differentiation in the classroom, and to activities that provide appropriate levels of challenge to all students. Teachers often report that oracy activities enabled them to identify talents in young people who may struggle to express themselves in writing. Our research has found that primary-aged students with the lowest levels of prior attainment derived the most benefit from structured oracy programmes<sup>xii</sup>. As such, quality oracy education has the potential to contribute to closing the attainment gap between advantaged and disadvantaged pupils. Students with high levels of prior attainment benefit from the aspects of a quality oracy education that involve knowledge-synthesis, open-ended tasks, in accordance with best practice on ensuring challenge for high prior-attainers.

2.4. Oracy provides benefits for students of all backgrounds. The ESU’s summer programme, *Debate Academy*, awards bursaries to ~50% of students, whose families have very low incomes. The other 50% of places go to students across the income distribution, and this includes students from very advantaged backgrounds. Across this social mix, >90% of students agreed that *Debate Academy* helped them to express themselves and increased their knowledge of the world around them; >85% of students agreed that *Debate Academy* helped them to build personal relationships. Purba (a participant) said, “You make amazing friends and learn new perspectives”.

2.5. The ESU worked with ‘London Debating Mental Health’ to deliver an oracy programme to young people engaged with child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) across London. This comprised a series of ESU mentor-led sessions in CAMHS units across London, reaching ~60 young people, and a final day of debates in a central London venue. Feedback from the young people involved was very positive, e.g. “This course has given me the ability to see what I am capable of when I am taken out of my comfort zone”. One young person with autism observed: “Even though I find it hard to talk to people on an individual level, I can talk to an audience much more easily as I don’t have to make eye contact or understand when I’m supposed to speak.”

2.6. Teachers in mainstream settings have also reported benefits for students with SEN: “We have a Mainstream Autism Base so often have students who find school challenging yet they feel able to join the [Debating] Society and contribute.” Benefits are also reported for students with speech disorders, who some worry will be excluded from oracy activities. A primary-aged *Discover Debating* participant told us debating had helped with her stammer: “I can find the words I want to say more easily”. A teacher at Pershore High School (Worcestershire) told us: “We had had students with speech impediments who have felt comfortable and confident to debate in front of the school.”

### **3. Provision and Access**

3.1. Quality oracy education must be led by schools. There is considerable diversity in the range of oracy provision that schools could offer, and schools themselves are best placed to decide which to prioritise. The ESU believes that, just as ‘sports provision’ should not be a conversation about only PE lessons, or only elite athlete support, so too ‘quality oracy education’ must include a wide range of opportunities, both within the curriculum and outside it, to allow all young people to follow their passions.

3.2. Provision within curricular teaching time should be well-structured, ensuring that oracy education is delivered to all students and co-ordinated across departments with specific expectations surrounding student-progress (see e.g. the work of School 21<sup>xiv</sup> and Highbury Grove Academy<sup>xv</sup>). The ESU believes that extra or co-curricular oracy provision provides additional benefits, providing time and space that can often not be found within the timetabled day, enabling students to participate in necessarily longer events, such as student parliaments, debates, ‘Model United Nations’, public speaking events or competitions in their communities. Broadcaster and Channel 4 News presenter Krishnan Guru-Murthy told us: “Quite often, it’s only the football or rugby teams who get to go out and meet kids from other schools. But debating really broadened my horizons. We debated in some very grand settings, against kids from much posher schools than ours. It raised our sense of what was possible in our lives. I’ve no doubt that if I hadn’t done the Schools’ Mace [Debating] Competition, I wouldn’t be presenting *Channel 4 News* now.”

3.3. Given that teachers often lack confidence and expertise in oracy teaching<sup>xvi</sup>, provision must be supported by outside agents, whether through direct provision to young people, or CPD for teachers. The ESU is fully supportive of efforts to improve the quality of external interventions and CPD for teachers through the accreditation of quality provision.

### **4. Factors creating unequal access to quality oracy education and barriers that teachers face in providing quality oracy education**

4.1. The ESU has observed three main barriers that teachers face in providing quality oracy education that particularly impact upon students in schools serving disadvantaged communities and in rural areas. These are: teachers’ knowledge and confidence; time

pressures and school networks. At present, schools with the lowest proportion of FSM pupils are twice as likely to offer debating clubs as schools with the highest (70% compared to 35%)<sup>xvii</sup>.

4.2. Teachers' knowledge and confidence: The ESU has found that schools serving advantaged communities are more likely to have teaching staff who have personal experience of quality oracy education, especially in relation to extra/co-curricular provision. These staff tend to be found running the Debating Club (where there is one) and co-ordinating programmes such as Student Parliaments etc. Schools without staff with this background often need additional external support to facilitate these opportunities for students, and to increase teachers' knowledge and confidence.

4.3. Time pressures: aside from the time pressure felt by many schools to focus teaching time on 'core subjects', the ESU notes two other respects in which time pressures hinder students from disadvantaged backgrounds in receiving quality oracy education. First, regarding after-school activities: schools serving disadvantaged communities often report additional barriers facing their students' participation, such as transport barriers (the school bus leaves directly after school) or students being needed at home (e.g. to care for siblings). This often prevents students being able to take part in activities that are routine for their more advantaged peers (e.g. regular after-school extra-curricular provision). Second, the contraction of school lunchtimes has disproportionately affected maintained schools. Only 10% of independent secondary schools had lunch breaks of 45 minutes or less, whereas 25% of secondary schools overall reported lunchbreaks of 35 minutes or less.<sup>xviii</sup> This severely curtails the opportunities for students to access clubs and activities that can be provided in a longer lunch break, which in combination with the pressures upon after school activities, disproportionately affects those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The ESU supports measures that ensure schools are able to provide extra or co-curricular opportunities within the timetabled school day, to allow young people from all backgrounds, not just the most advantaged, to pursue their interests.

4.4. School and teacher networks: The ESU has found that schools serving advantaged communities are more likely to have a history of participating in extra-curricular oracy activities such as debating and public speaking. As such, they are more likely to be embedded within networks of schools and teachers that are mutually supportive in this regard (e.g. for inter-school competitions). Initiatives to encourage the involvement of more schools are often focused around urban hubs: the ESU's debating and public speaking competitions are unusual amongst national competitions in having a substantial rural reach. This is due to barriers around transport costs and organising events in areas with a low population density. Therefore, quality oracy provision needs to include helping schools and teachers to tap into local and national networks.

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