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Oracy matters

Introduction to the special issue on oracy

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ORACY MATTERS. INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE ON ORACY

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This special issue is the first issue in the history of 20 years of the L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature on Oracy. That might be an indication of the lack of research in L1-oracy. With this special issue we would like to stimulate other researchers in L1-Education to study oracy.

Oracy is the most utilized and basic form of human communication, and is fundamental in being able to express oneself as well as participating in civic life. Oracy makes humans available for each other's expressed inner thoughts, and for ourselves. In return, oracy makes humans unique as a species (Tomasello, 2010). We acquire the language system. We develop oral competence. At the same time we practice and improve our language learning system, establishing the basis for the acquisition of other languages and the written code, and opening the window to the world of words and concepts. We learn by mirroring each other, through complex interaction with gestures, vocal language, and cognition (Tomasello, 2010). As humans, we, learn and develop from each other's responses.

Oracy is productive, sharing one's own thoughts by converting thoughts into language and sounds as well as receptive, processing received sounds into meaning. Production and reception goes often hand in hand, e.g. in a conversation: give and take. Settings can vary along many dimensions, like the direction (a pure monologue vs a dialogue), the number of participants (speaking to an audience of 100 listeners

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or to a friend), the aim (sharing, learning, convincing, informing, instructing etc.), the medium (vis a vis, telephone, video conferencing), etc. Oracy serves successful schooling, while it is the medium of classroom instruction and learning. It also functions as a communicative tool, for expressive, relational, referential and persuasive functions.

When a child enters the school system, he or she is already influenced significantly by experiences in using oral language. It is a child's primary discourse acquired at home in the family (Gee, 2012). The child meets the secondary discourses often outside the home like in school or later in the life of work (Gee, 2012). We acquire oral competence through an immersive process while also acquiring numerous other cognitive and social skills (Rost, 2011, p. 118). Hence, to be able to adjust to multiple social and cultural aspects and contexts is considered a part of oral competence. Studies have indicated strong relations between social competence, acceptance and status linked to oral competence (van der Wilt, van Kruistum, van der Veen, & van Oers, B., 2015 in Mercer et. al, 2017). Thus, teaching oracy in a specific and systematical way in utilizing speech effectively becomes crucial for students' classroom and group interaction as well as developing life-long competence for agency and citizenship. Positive associations between group interactions and increased student' learning has been found as a result of specific training and teaching of oral competence (Dawes, 2008; Howe and Abedin, 2013 in Mercer at al., 2017). This illustrates the importance of teaching oral competence explicitly and systematical. Since oracy is so fragmented and interconnected to i.e. other literacies and thinking, it becomes especially crucial to establish and boost oracy also as a discipline on its own.

Although oracy serve as a basis and is extremely important in schooling, society and work-life, explicit instruction in oracy is scarce. One of the reasons might be that oral competence is considered to be already acquired by students when entering school. In the past, this has often led to the assumption that oral competence was not necessary to be taught explicitly and systematically. Oracy has a low status, while acquiring the written code is far more visible as an outcome of schooling. Alexander (2012) states that teachers, parents and inspectors often consider written work as the only "real" work, while talk is primarily viewed as supportive for these skills. According to Alexander (2012), this is especially true for L1 education. L2 has come further along with their research on oracy in comparison to L1 (Luoma, 2004). International assessments like PIRLS/TIMSS and PISA only test mathematics and reading; oracy in L1 is not included in the tests. On a positive note, oracy in L1 is being tested on an individual level and on a system level in some countries at the end of cycles in secondary education, lower or upper. In the Netherlands, for instance, part of the examination program is testing oral skills, next to reading, writing, argumentation skills and literature. Schools may choose between participating in a discussion, a debate or an oral presentation. Student must show that they can participate actively and effectively in discussions, debates and consultations, interact adequately and must demonstrate a sufficient vocabulary. These examinations are school bound (Ex-

amenprogramma Nederlandse taal havo/vwo vanaf het CE 2014). Most of the learning goes via practice and feedback: students prepare a discussion by studying sources, and receive feedback on criteria like content, delivery, interaction and language use. The practice session is a test session and at the same time: students get a score for their annual report. Due to limited time, students only practice once a year, and are present as 'observers' when another group practices. See for Austria and Germany (Breit, Bruneforth, & Schreiner (2016) and Weirich, Bachinger, Trendtel & Krelle (2019, this issue).

A deeper analysis of national curricula may reveal different views on oracy, related to cultural history. In Norway for instance, oral examinations are a part of many subjects, not just in the subject of Norwegian as L1 (Kaldahl, 2019, this issue). The basic idea is that competences practiced in L1 are most likely transferred to and adapted in other disciplines. Oracy is interrelated through thinking (cognition) and speaking in all human activities and in disciplines as well as across disciplines in education. Vygotsky (1978, 1987) connected speaking and thinking dynamically:

> "The complex movement from the first vague emergence of the thought to its completion in a verbal formulation …. Thought is not expressed but completed in the word….Any thought has movement. It unfolds … This flow of thought is realized as an internal movement through several planes. As a transition from thought to word and from word to thought" (Vygotsky, 1987, pp. 249-250).

The Norwegian idea is that oracy is part of all subjects, and should be demonstrated in all subjects, combines two views on oracy; oracy as a mean to interactivity to guide thinking and content development, and oracy as a skill to communicate thinking, eventually, to communicate it interactively. The Norwegian curriculum, Norwegian Knowledge Promotion, 2006), is based on the DeSeCo key-competences (OECD, 2003, 2005). In Norway, Kjell Lars Berge (2007) claimed that oracy was the forgotten competence connected to no research center as opposed to the other key competences (reading, writing, mathematics, ICT) in the curriculum. As, many other countries, Norway adapted these key competences into their curriculum; however, when oracy is supposed to be taught and assessed across subjects, it might be challenging for teachers since this previously has been a task especially for L1 (Berge, 2007). Additionally, assessment of oracy has traditionally also been done in disciplines such as L2 and L3.

1.   A SHORT HISTORY

The most outspoken advocate of oracy was Andrew Wilkinson, UK, who published in the 60's-80's on the teaching of English. His books on Spoken English (1965) and Listening (1974), both written with colleagues, are still important basic resources for teacher educators.

In 1965, Andrew Wilkinson coined the term oracy, and underlined the importance of speaking and listening competence in education (Wilkinson, 1965). Wil-

kinson (1968) stressed that oracy is not a subject in itself rather a condition for learning in disciplines. He further emphasized that oracy is of its nature ephemeral, exercised by almost everyone most of the time, and serves to communicate in different cultural and social contexts (Wilkinson, 1968). The ability to create new ideas and thoughts through the spoken word, instead of repeating, becomes the very definition of learning (Wilkinson, 1965). Alexander (2012, p.10) argues that "children's capacity to use speech to express their thoughts and communicate with others, in education and in life" is key in human existence.

Wilkinson viewed oracy as being the very foundation for human happiness and well-being; thus, oracy is so essential that it should not be considered as a general competence, next to literacy and numeracy (Wilkinson, 1965, p. 13). He further claimed that the prime function of speech is for humans to interact with each other and this makes us in return special as a species. Humans exercise oracy frequently; however, oracy seemed to be neglected and not being worthy attention (Wilkinson, 1965). This function of oracy is the leading concept in the work of Neil Mercer (Mercer et al., 2017). Mercer emphasizes the spoken language as a tool for humans to think creatively and productively together (Littleton & Mercer, 2013; Mercer and Hodginson, 2008). Mercer's work is very important, for L1 as well as for other subjects, as he demonstrates what qualities of interaction contributes to learning, and how instructional settings can contribute to more effective pair and group interactions. Mercer continues the work of Douglas Barnes, who studied the use of language in science classes and the focus of oracy in both cognitive and social learning (Barnes, 1973; Barnes & Todd, 1977). Quality of talk makes a difference: there is now a "critical mass of robust evidence, that the quality of classroom talk has a measurable impact on standards of attainment in English, mathematics and science." (Alexander, 2012, p. 1.)

At the time, Wilkinson referred to earlier literature and reports from the Ministry of Education in Britain, and argued that more systematic teaching is needed and practice in concrete situations as opposed to random oral activities such as debate and discussions. This call is still relevant. Oracy is not only important in academics but also in work settings and a democratic society. Employers want people who can present clearly, be good team-members, have good collaboration skills, as well as being good and attentive listeners (Mercer et. al., 2017). Oracy is also crucial to be able to participate in a democratic society.

Recently, Alexander (2012) reiterated the plea for oracy, stating that "employers, university admission tutors and others regularly complain that applicants oral communication skills are in decline." (Alexander, 2012, p. 5) . He adds that there cannot be any doubt towards the significance of oracy and the role it should play in a curriculum. However, he still recognizes the fact that "listening" and "speaking" as well as communicative skills hold a "disputable educational significance". He therefore stresses, that the term oracy as coined by Wilkinson should be used instead. Alexander argues that—like literacy—the word "oracy" implies that it is an acquired skill (Alexander, 2012, p. 2).

We would not be surprised if oracy becomes even more important in the near future than it is now. Globalization and digitalization leads to distant discussions, brainstorms, decision-making, collaborative work. It leads to new forms of communication ('written' chats, video chats), in which oracy has a central role. Oral text processing (oral to text) may lead to have children dictating their text to the computer instead of actually writing the text. However, the basics may not change the quality of interaction to reach good thinking, and quality of rhetoric to achieve communicative goals.

2. THE PAPERS IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

In the Nordic countries of Europe, oracy and rhetoric are often combined and seen as intertwined. Rhetoric provides the vocabulary to describe the qualities of oral language, which can be useful in assessment of oral language as well as in teaching oral language competence (Gelang, 2008; Kaldahl, ibid; Olsson Jers, 2010; Svenkerud, 2013; Svennevig, Tønnesson, Svenkerud, & Klette, 2012). Since ancient Greece, the ability to make oneself understood and be able to speak with dignity and respect to different audiences and in multiple contexts is essential (Aristotle, Trans. 2006) as well as the ability to become more aware of language use and use language more strategically will in return enhance oral language use for learning. This is a part of a complex interaction that would benefit of a metalanguage for oracy (Kaldahl, ibid; Svenkerud, 2013; Svennevig, Tønnesson, Svenkerud, & Klette, 2012, Penne & Hertzberg, 2015). According to the rhetorical tradition, to utter oneself was and still is a precondition for participation in civic life and in a democratic society. Rhetoric has a vocabulary to describe the qualities of oral language (*rhetorica*/the discipline) or the art of speaking as well as the science of how to speak well (*eloquential*/the domain) (Andersen, 1995; Aristotle, Trans. 2006; Quntalian, Trans. 2004; Kaldahl, 2019, this issue), thus making rhetoric educational. Rhetoric is still the main paradigm for oral language use i.e. in the United States for speech classes and debate programs (Kaldahl, 2019, this issue). Anne-Grete Kaldahl's article in this issue uses ideas and concepts from classic rhetoric to explore 10th grade teachers' assessment on a national high-stake oracy exam across disciplines. In this endeavor, Kaldahl studies how oracy is conceptualized and assessed in seven disciplines, focusing on differences and similarities between disciplines.

The new focus on oracy in the last decade has also led to a need for assessment tools for teachers. In German speaking countries like Austria, Germany and Switzerland, listening comprehension is tested in different large-scale assessments. However, this is a fairly new development (e.g. the decision of the German KMK, the German ministers of education, to assess L1-listening comprehension in Large scale assessment was introduced in 2004 (KMK, 2004), in Austria, the first nationwide assessment in listening comprehension was conducted in 2015 (Breit et al., 2016)).

In their contribution *Stịm·mig: Assessing Prosodic Comprehension in Primary School*, Ulrike Behrens and Sebastian Weirich argue that prosodic comprehension,

i.e. students' ability to understand prosodically encoded content has not been assessed in German speaking countries. Here they pick up the basics from Wilkinson's concept of listening: recognizing the specifics meaning making elements of sound (Wilkinson, 1975). The article focusses on development of test items for this purpose. Behrens and Weirich present exemplary items to illustrate the item design. Additionally they present data from a large pilot study administered by the Institute for Educational Quality Improvement (IQB) in Berlin. They were able to test the effects of the presentation modes (written vs. auditory) of the stimulus texts and test items in a multiple matrix sampling design. The study shows that prosodic comprehension is a construct that is empirically distinguishable from both verbal comprehension and reading comprehension. However, Behrens and Weirich argue, that detailed analysis of the existing data and the items is necessary to receive a fuller understanding of the structure of the prosodic comprehension.

Sebastian Weirich, Antonia Bachinger, Matthias Trendtel and Michael Krelle focus on listening comprehension in large-scale assessments in Austria and Germany. In their research report, they describe one assessment from each country respectively. They show that although both assessments are based on the same theoretical frameworks, some different decisions have been made about test procedures and performance level descriptors (PLDs), e.g. stimulus length and number of items. Moreover, they show that the choice of an appropriate statistical model has to cater to empirical as well as pedagogical needs. These insights are illustrated by exemplary tasks and empirical examples. They use data from large-scale assessments from both countries, the BIST-Ü pilot study conducted by the BIFIE in Austria and the VERA-study conducted by the IQB in Germany. Their conclusions primarily focus on future test development and possible joint studies.

Jordi Casteleyn explores the L1 public speaking of secondary education students in an experimental intervention study in Flanders, Belgium. He presents two empirical studies that examine the impact of an improv(isational) training on public speaking and public speaking stress, while he explores the potential of improv(isational) theatre for public speaking. Casteleyn discusses the complex nature of research into improving L1 public speaking of secondary education students.

Seongseog Park & Byeonggon Min present a South-Korean study on the construction of an instrument to measure reflective attitude toward conversation (RAC). The authors provide an overview of the importance on reflective thinking in and on conversation, and designed and tested a reliable questionnaire to measure RAC consisting of three constructs defined as thoughtful action, content/process reflection and premise reflection.

3.   FUTURE STUDIES: ORACY MATTERS

The papers in this special issue certainly do not cover the whole range of oracy issues in L1-education and in education as a whole. In the future, further studies are needed

on oracy across disciplines as well as on the oracy construct. Questions that are urgent to answer is what is oracy in different countries as well as how can oracy be assessed summatively and formatively. Additionally, further research on the acquisition of oral competence and on the correlations between oracy and overall student performance and especially reading comprehension is called for. We hope that through this, awareness for and appreciation of oracy will improve even further. Oracy matters (MacLure, Philips & Wilkinson, 1988).

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