

It's not what you say, it's the way that you say it

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According to new research from Yale University, when we hear someone speak we form near-instantaneous conclusions about their social class. It takes just seven random words they claim.

The Professional Speechwriters' Association suggests that content only accounts for 11 per cent of our impact when we talk. Passion, expertise, voice and presence are all twice as important in making a first impression.

And over a century ago George Bernard Shaw in 'Pygmalion' had his own memorable slant on speaking: 'It is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman despise him.'

One of the fastest growing education charities in the UK is [Voice 21](#) – and deservedly so. Since its launch five years ago, the charity has engaged with thousands of schools across the country, and is making a pleasurable difference to young people's classroom experiences.

The mission is simple: to enable teachers to provide a high quality oracy education so that all pupils can find their voice for success in school and life. Its creators note that oracy is complex, 'too often both everywhere and nowhere within a school'.

We know that young people's ability to be articulate, effective communicators and good listeners lies at the heart of their being successful learners and ready to thrive in employment, further and higher education.

Voice 21 has given to teachers in primary and secondary classrooms an immensely helpful framework to shape oracy: from voice, body language and vocabulary to rhetorical techniques, content and audience awareness. And now the charity has really come of age in publishing [The Oracy Benchmarks](#).

The five companioned benchmarks seek to help (a) teachers and (b) schools – over time and in a sustainable manner - teach oracy explicitly, nurture it continually, weave it into the curriculum and ensure its status and impact.

The thoughtfully crafted benchmarks are clear, accessible and eminently applicable across the 3 – 18 age range. There is a particular emphasis in Benchmark 1 on teachers establishing ambitious norms for talk so that classroom commerce is purposeful. Benchmark 4 focuses on how teachers can harness oracy to deepen and enhance students' knowledge and understanding within a given subject domain.

Of course no whole-school initiative will thrive without the active engagement of leaders at all levels. Thus Benchmark 2 shines a proper light on oracy being showcased and celebrated throughout school life.

The positive sign across the nation's schools is that oracy is increasingly finding its own voice amongst many teachers and leaders – and policy makers are catching up too. The recently published [The Forgotten Third](#) has further highlighted the imperative for all teachers, irrespective of subject background, to see themselves as 'leaders of language', spoken and written.

Yet it is over four decades since the publication of [A language for life](#) which made its central recommendation the need for all teachers to model and explain language well in classrooms. We are still not there as a profession. Consistently high quality language teaching eludes us.

For an oracy framework to create fundamental change, all teachers need to pause when they teach, reflect for a moment on their own articulacy and command of sophisticated language techniques, and make *explicit* what they as intelligent well-trained graduates know *implicitly*.

That is the golden key not only to effective oracy in our schools, but to a major shift in how the majority of the school population commands the great global language that is English.

In the words of the poet Bob Dylan in 'A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall':

And I'll tell it and think it and speak it and breathe it
And reflect it from the mountain so all souls can see it
Then I'll stand on the ocean until I start sinkin'
But I'll know my song well before I start singin'

In the meantime, [Voice 21](#) has given us a precious resource.
