Making the case for oracy skills in higher education: practices and opportunities

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Abstract

In this paper I make the case for embedding oracy practices in the HE curriculum through explicit teaching of oracy skills and a shared common language to describe these skills. Active learning and teaching approaches as well as growing expectations of graduate employability skills have resulted in greater demands on students in UK higher education in terms of their oracy (speaking and listening) skills. Whilst oracy skills have long been the focus of studies in compulsory educational contexts, there is little transfer of research findings to a higher education context. With the aim of opening up the discussion on oracy skills in HE, this paper reports on an exploratory study carried out to investigate how teachers on two undergraduate business modules incorporated oral communication skills in their content, pedagogy and assessment. Data were gathered from observations of lectures and seminars, course documents, and semi-structured interviews with tutors. With reference to an Oracy Skills Framework the paper concludes with suggestions for how oracy skills may be more explicitly embedded into the undergraduate curriculum.

Keywords

Introduction

The theoretical frameworks and discussions on oracy in this paper are situated within a sociocultural perspective on learning, where learning is mediated by language; in this case, classroom talk (Mercer & Dawes 2014). Although there has been a plethora of scholarly work on the sociocultural dimensions of classroom talk and oracy practices in UK school contexts (Barnes 2010; Mercer 2000; Mercer, Warwick & Ahmed 2017; Myhill & Warren 2005), there is little focus on oracy skills in post-compulsory settings (Doherty, Kettle, May & Caukill 2011; Stokoe 2000). The aim of this study was to draw on this tradition of research and explore oracy practices in a UK higher-education context.

The term "oracy" was coined by Wilkinson (1965) to distinguish the skills of speaking and listening from reading and writing (literacy). This study uses the Oracy Skills Framework, developed by Mercer, Warwick and Ahmed (2017) at the University of Cambridge, as both a reference point and a tool for analysis. The Oracy Skills Framework draws on theories from second-language acquisition, such as communicative competence (discourse competence, linguistic competence, actional competence, sociocultural competence and strategic competence), as well as notions of accuracy, fluency and complexity. Perhaps the most significant characteristic of the Oracy Skills Framework is its development through extensive feedback from practitioners and professional experts (Mercer et al. 2017). It has been chosen for this study because of its application to practice and its comprehensibility and accessibility to teachers and students. Ultimately the Oracy Skills Framework represents the different skills needed for effective spoken communication, and represents a range of oracy skills that students might need to draw upon in different academic and social contexts. In identifying these dimensions, the authors point out that different spoken tasks will require different spoken skills. The framework can therefore be flexible to adapt to a variety of contexts, and does not represent any particular cultural bias. The four areas of skills required for effective spoken communication are presented in the left column, and their description in the right column.

Table 1. The Oracy Skills Framework (Mercer et al. 2017)

Physical	
● Voice	● Fluency and pace of speech, tonal variation, clarity of pronunciation, voice projection
● Body language	● Gesture and posture
Linguistic	
● Vocabulary	● Appropriate vocabulary choice
● Language variety	● Register, grammar
● Structure	● Structure and organisation of talk
● Rhetorical techniques	● Metaphor, humour, irony, mimicry
Cognitive	
● Content	● Choice of content, building on the views of others
● Clarifying and summarising	● Seeking information and clarification through questions, summarising
● Self-regulation	● Maintaining focus on task, time-management

• Reasoning • Audience awareness	• Giving reasons to support views, critically examining ideas • Taking into account level of audience

Social and emotional
    • Working with others
    • Listening and responding
    • Confidence in speaking
	• Guiding or managing interactions, turn-taking
	• Listening actively and responding appropriately
	• Self-assurance, liveliness and flair

Oracy skills play a significant role in thinking (Mah 2016) and allow students to articulate their ideas effectively in both academic and non-academic contexts (Alexander 2013). These are crucial skills across all disciplines in a higher-education context, and, unlike conversation, need to be explicitly taught and fostered through interaction with others in an educational context (Mercer & Dawes 2014).

In the world of work, oral communication skills have been identified as "one of the most desired graduate employability skills" (Jackson 2014, p. 22), and it has been noted that presentation skills in particular are key for professional life (Ritchie 2016). Proficiency in and an awareness of the power of appropriate language represent cultural capital, and it has been argued that oracy skills are part of this cultural capital, as they provide access to the cultures and practices of the workplace (Doherty et al. 2011). Johnson, Veitch and Dewiyanti (2015) argue the case for embedding communication skills as a key graduate attribute across the disciplinary higher-education curriculum. This paper goes further by suggesting a more explicit articulation of what these communication skills are, with a specific focus on oral communication skills.

This study aims to stimulate discussion and research on current oracy practices in higher education by exploring how two teachers manage oracy skills in a first-year and a final-year business undergraduate module. This paper also presents the case for embedding oracy skills into the higher-education curriculum to provide all students with equitable opportunities for participation in their educational and professional life.

Background

The changing nature of pedagogy in higher education to more active learning approaches inevitably places demands on students in terms of speaking skills (Doherty et al. 2011). Lectures are becoming more interactive (Roberts 2017), and seminars require a high level of verbal participation (Engin 2017). Assessment of oral skills is also prevalent in higher education (Huxham, Campbell & Westwood 2016), and a particularly common form of oral assessment is oral presentations (Joughin 2007). Research has found that students engage when they are assessed (Larkin & Richardson 2013) and perform better when they are aware of what oral skills they are developing. For example, Tsang (2017) found that students' awareness of oral presentations was raised through explicit classroom discussion of the assessment criteria used to assess the presentations. In this way, students not only are familiar with the assessment rubric, but also understand the meta-language used to describe the oral skills. Similarly, Ritchie (2016) found that a focus on rubrics through self-evaluation of videoed performance raised metacognition and improved performance in the final assessment. The need to be explicit about learning outcomes and the importance of a shared terminology regarding spoken skills is key to effectively supporting students' development of these skills (Mercer-Mapstone & Matthews 2017) and studies

such as these provide evidence for the claim that oracy skills need to be integrated into the curriculum in terms of content, assessment and pedagogy.

Higher-education pedagogy and research to date has neglected the area of oracy skills in favour of literacy skills (Darling 2005; Doherty et al. 2011), as the ability to use appropriate oral communication skills is often assumed. Similarly, strong arguments are currently being proposed for embedding literacy skills in the UK higher-education curriculum (Hathaway 2015; Wingate, Andon & Cogo 2011), yet there is no discussion of embedding oracy skills. Although the challenges for students for whom English is a second language are well documented (Aguilar 2016; Basturkmen 2016), and support is provided through English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses, studies suggest that all students, regardless of linguistic background, may find speaking in groups or seminars stressful and unfamiliar (Remedios, Clarke & Hawthorne 2008). Clinton and Kelly (2017) point out that in group discussions students often have communication problems that they may not experience in lectures, and that oral presentations in particular can be challenging.

Effective oral communication skills, including listening skills (Caspersz & Stasinska 2015), are considered to be graduate attributes. Recently, Andrews and Higson (2014) found that graduate employers of business and management students specifically identified presentation skills as important. However, despite the clear need for effective oral communication skills in the business workplace, a gap is often perceived between the employer's expectations and the student's competence (Jackson 2014). Similarly, there is a perceived lack of agreement on specifically what oral communication skills involve, and a lack of understanding of how to teach and assess them (Dunbar, Brooks & Kubicka-Miller 2006; Robles 2012). Studies such as Johnson et al. (2015) support the argument for embedding communication skills in the higher-education curriculum, but fail to articulate what they mean by communication skills. The identification of oral communication skills "will better enable the successful teaching, learning and assessment of the skill set in [higher education]" (Jackson 2014, p. 24). The Oracy Skills Framework (Mercer et al., 2017) breaks oracy skills down into dimensions and sub-skills, allowing for a shared reference for both teaching and assessment purposes. Although it may be challenging to agree on a fixed set of skills, the Oracy Skills Framework provides a starting point as well as a common terminology for talking about oracy skills in higher education. This can be particularly useful where disciplinary teachers may not feel comfortable teaching oral communication skills.

One notable exception to the lack of research into oracy in higher education is a study by Doherty et al. (2011) that examined the oracy demands of assessment tasks on undergraduate students. They conclude that oracy demands may be *implicit* or *explicit* depending on the extent to which the oracy skills are supported through teaching resources, explicit assessment rubrics and formative feedback. They argue that oracy demands need to be explicit because "[by] assessing skills that were not explicitly developed in the curriculum, the exercise became an assessment of what prior skills and dispositions students brought to the task" (p. 34). Drawing on the work of Doherty et al. (2011), I make the distinction between oracy as *process* and oracy as *product*. Oracy as process occurs when students are expected to use spoken skills to achieve the final outcome, such as an assessment, or to manage their group-work activities, but there is no explicit focus on the development of these spoken skills. Oracy as process views spoken skills as a medium or tool for learning, and they remain part of the hidden curriculum. Oracy as product happens when there is an explicit recognition of spoken skills, which may involve the teaching and development of these skills and an identification of what spoken skills involve (Doherty et al. 2011). Oracy becomes both the medium of learning and the outcome. Considering that spoken communication skills are a key attribute for business graduates (Robles 2012), it would seem fundamental that oracy is viewed as both a process and a product in the undergraduate curriculum.

As a result of active teaching and learning approaches, employability expectations and oracy demands associated with assessment tasks, the conversation on oracy skills in undergraduate provision needs to be expanded. One way to do this is to explore current practices with reference to the Oracy Skills Framework. A comparison of practices can offer insights into how and to what extent oracy practices already exist in some higher-education contexts. Through a small-scale study that focused on the two research questions below, I make the argument for embedding oral communication skills in the curriculum and suggest practical steps to emphasise the value of oracy skills in the student higher-education experience.

RQ 1: To what extent are oracy skills viewed as process and/or product in two undergraduate business modules?

RQ 2: With reference to the Oracy Skills Framework, how are oracy skills perceived?

The study

Context

This research takes an exploratory case-study approach that focuses on two business-studies modules in one institution. Although this is a narrow study in terms of location and disciplinary practice, the intention is to illuminate features of an issue that has previously been little studied; in this case, oracy practices in UK undergraduate education. One of the benefits of a case-study approach is that it "provides a unique example of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply by presenting them with abstract theories or principles" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007, p. 253). I felt that following two modules in the form of case studies afforded a deeper and emic perspective on the module in terms of the oracy expectations of the content, teaching approach and assessments. Business as a discipline was chosen for the study due to the centrality of oral presentations as part of the content and assessments. Since this is one discipline, I make no claims to generalisability, yet I believe many of the practices and perspectives on oracy skills will resonate with teachers in other disciplines, particularly the social sciences. Module A was a first-semester, first-year core module in the business school. There were approximately 650 students divided into two large groups (300 and 350) for one-hour weekly lectures, and divided into groups of 20 to 25 for one-hour weekly tutorials. Module B was a first-semester, final-year elective module in the business school. The class of 25 students met once a week for a three-hour workshop. In both modules 50% of the final assessments comprised group oral presentations. I identified these two modules as they provide examples from two different year groups as well as offering perspectives from modules with a large cohort and a smaller, elective cohort.

Participants

Ethical approval was granted by the university ethics committee, and the ethical guidelines set out by the British Education Research Association (BERA 2011) were followed throughout. Participants in the study included all students from the two modules and two teachers from the business school. The students were a mix of UK home students, EU students and international students, and therefore represented considerable linguistic diversity. In both modules the students worked in groups predetermined by the teacher, meaning that the groups were also mixed. The students, however, did not participate in data collection. The two teachers had taught for many years, both at the site of the study and at other higher-education institutions. Following a

colleague's recommendation, I invited them to participate through email. Prior to the start of the semester, I spent 30 minutes with each tutor explaining the aims and purposes of the research, and both tutors gave informed consent. They were given the option to withdraw at any time.

Researcher reflexivity

My role in the university was that of academic developer. I worked with staff across the university on teaching and learning activities. I was not a lecturer in the business school, and therefore had no prior knowledge of the curriculum. For most of the study my role was that of observer, sitting at the back of the classes and taking notes. In Module A, the lecture hall was very large and my presence was unobtrusive. However, in both modules' seminars and in the workshops of Module B my presence was more intrusive. I attempted to mitigate any impact by taking notes with pen and paper, as I felt this was less noisy than a computer, and I sat at the back of the room, out of the direct view of students. This study took place over an extended period of time (one semester), and as a result students became used to my presence as an observer. Towards the end of the semester the teacher of Module A asked me to act as a second marker for a number of the final group presentation assessments, and in Module B I was asked to give a short teaching session to the students on presentation skills. I was aware that these activities took me into the zone of participant observer (Wellington 2000), but I felt this was appropriate as these opportunities afforded me greater understanding of the processes of oracy practice and gave me an insider perspective (Cohen et al. 2007). Moreover, due to the commitment from the two teachers in this study, I felt it was important that I accept and support them. It is possible that the two teachers asked me to join in the module activities due to my role in the university, and a perception that I was an "expert".

Although I was conscious of possible influences on the data from both my presence and my background knowledge, I was also cognisant that potential effects cannot be avoided in participant observation. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) note, researchers work with, and even exploit, their knowledge, but ensure that they subject the data "to systematic inquiry where doubt seems justified" (p. 15). The approach to being transparent is to show "the workings" (Holliday 2007), which I have done through use of document analysis and explicit and exemplified coding, as described below.

Data collection

Observations

To answer research question 1, I observed all the weekly lectures and tutorials for Module A, and the weekly workshops for Module B. In Module A, I also observed the final-assessment presentations of 20 groups. In Module B, I observed all four groups' final-assessment presentations. During the weekly observations I took notes on the content, interaction formats and any explicit reference to oracy skills as part of the input.

Document analysis

To enrich the observational and interview data, I collected secondary sources of data such as module descriptors, assessment rubrics and other weekly handouts. These sources of data were "complementary" (Wellington 2000, p. 110) to the data derived from primary sources. These documents proved to be extremely useful in cross-referencing the activities in the taught sessions with the learning outcomes and rubrics provided in written form. The rubrics were compared with the Oracy Skills Framework in the listed features of spoken skills.

Interviews

Three weeks before the end of the semester I carried out semi-structured interviews with each teacher in their respective offices (Appendix A contains the questions). The interviews lasted 14 minutes (Module A) and 12 minutes (Module B). The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim (Rapley 2008) in NVivo. I sent the transcripts to the two teachers for respondent validation. They both agreed that the transcripts accurately reflected the interviews.

Data analysis

Observational data collected over the semester was collated and examined for themes. The analysis focused specifically on explicit or implicit reference in the lectures, tutorials or workshops to oracy skills. Module documents (descriptors, assessment rubrics, handouts) were used to verify factual data such as the learning outcomes and assessment focus, and to identify sub-skills of the presentation skills as described in the rubrics. Table 2 summarises the observational data.

The Oracy Skills Framework (Mercer et al. 2017) was used to drive the analysis of the interview data (Appendix B gives worked examples). The framework provided a basis on which to map tutor perceptions of oracy features against the content, pedagogy and assessment of the module to reveal implicit and explicit expectations. Transcripts of the interviews were analysed iteratively, with codes identified and organised in NVivo.

Findings

To what extent are oracy skills viewed as process and/or product in two undergraduate business modules?

Table 2 summarises the features of oracy as process and oracy as product from the two modules. These features are further discussed below.

Table 2. Oracy as process and as product

Oracy as process (Module A and B)	Oracy as product (Module A)
Focus on importance of teamwork Group work as the major interaction pattern Focus on content of presentation Focus on the skills needed for a consultant Input on interview techniques Opportunities for real-life interviews with consultants Opportunities for interaction in the sessions Opportunities for asking the teacher questions	Focus on soft skills needed for the business world Reference to the statistics on top soft skills required by employers Input on professionalism, professional image Explicit presentation of rubrics Rubrics that identify sub-skills of speaking Opportunities for mini-presentations Videos demonstrating strong presentation skills Formative feedback Use of terms such as "speaking skills", "presentation skills", "rubrics", "professionalism", "soft skills", "employability" Explicit reference to the importance of appropriate registers of vocabulary and terminology Use of role-plays

Content

The content of the module was derived from the learning outcomes articulated in the module outline, available to all students through the university's VLE system. Module A included a learning outcome that explicitly referenced presentation skills to "improve general skills for study and employability", and "design and take an active delivery role in group presentation". These two learning outcomes situated the speaking skills in the framework of academic skills and the long-term aim of employability. The second learning outcome made an implicit reference to the group-work skills required for the module, as well as the delivery aspect of the presentation. Module B made no reference to speaking skills, group work or presentation skills in the learning outcomes. In Module A lectures, the content was almost entirely on oral presentations. Topics covered included why presentations are important in the business world, why teamwork is important, appropriate body language in presentations and the importance of a professional image. In the tutorials the tutor further elaborated on these aspects, and students had further opportunities to ask questions. In Module B, the first session focused on the importance of teamwork, and thereafter the workshops focused on the content of their presentation (a consultancy project) and input on how to do interviews. Also, the tutor of Module B invited me to give a short session on presentation skills to the students. In the session I asked students to discuss their presentation experiences so far and introduced the Oracy Skills Framework (Mercer et al. 2017) to structure their reflection on strengths and weaknesses.

Assessment

For both modules, 50% of the final grades were assigned to group presentations (20 minutes plus questions for Module A, 30 minutes plus questions for Module B). For Module A, the 50% included a small percentage for individual responses to questions; for Module B, the entire 50% was based on the group performance. The rubrics used for grading the presentation revealed different features of oracy skills. For Module A, the rubrics covered delivery, content, visuals and duration. Delivery specifically focused on the physical dimensions of audibility and body language. Content focused on organisation and coherence. These were all group marks, and 15% was given to individual responses to assessor questions, which required clarity and evidence. The assessment rubrics for Module B focused almost entirely on content. Since the purpose was presenting a consultancy project to a company outlining their challenges and recommendations, 75% of the rubrics focused on the strength of the recommendations and the relevant research, and 25% focused on the delivery (timing, pacing, audience engagement, demonstration of subject, visuals) and ability to respond to questions.

Pedagogy

Module A was designed around weekly one-hour lectures of about 650 students (in cohorts of 350 and 300 students), with follow-up one-hour tutorials in groups of 20 to 25. Module B, an elective module, was designed around weekly three-hour workshops with 25 students. Module A lectures were mostly monologic, but there were many opportunities for interaction through questions the tutor posed to the class. The tutorials mostly consisted of students working in their groups preparing for their final group presentation. The tutor worked with each group individually. There were several opportunities for mini-presentations to the class, on which the tutor gave feedback based on the rubric. Thus students received formative feedback, although the students themselves did not work with the rubric, nor did they give peer feedback. The tutorials were interactive, with opportunities for questions and clarification. The workshops for Module B were interactive. The tutor usually spent the first 30 to 40 minutes setting the aims of the session and clarifying steps in

the consultancy project. The remainder of each workshop was group-work based, with students preparing their interview questions, analysing their data and preparing their presentation. There was no opportunity for presentation practice and no formative tutor or peer feedback. When I asked the tutor about this, she responded that students were in their final year and therefore had a lot of experience in giving oral presentations.

With reference to the Oracy Skills Framework, how are oracy skills perceived?

Tutor A

Tutor A gave great importance to the **linguistic** dimensions of oracy skills. For her, it was very important that students possessed appropriate vocabulary; in particular, subject-specific vocabulary. She commented on the need for *"business vocabulary"*, so that students could *"communicate in a business-like way"*, and the aim of her module was so that students could *"increase their vocabulary"*. Similarly, she recognised the different genres that students needed to be able to operate in: they needed to learn *"different ways that we speak in different contexts"*, and be able to *"respond in a business context"*. She wanted students to be able to *"respond eloquently [and] logically in a sort of logical way, rather than [a] sort of scatter-gun approach"*. The focus on linguistic dimension was specific to the context of business. There were some references to the **physical** dimension, mostly that students needed to learn body language and *"speak clearly to be understood"*. Her comments revealed a strong disciplinary, pragmatic and employability perspective on oracy skills. She went on to say that oracy skills are *"critical"* in a business environment because *"from day one you're going to have an interview. You've got to be able to speak. If you can't speak, you can't really do business"*. When asked to reflect on the role of oracy skills in the teaching approach, Tutor A commented that teachers may not be willing to change their practice: *"Teachers don't feel comfortable teaching the soft skills, I think it takes a lot of work."*

Tutor B

Tutor B also referred to the **linguistic** dimensions of oracy skills in terms of vocabulary and genre. For Tutor B the terminology was paramount, and she commented on the need for *"appropriate terminology"* rather than *"general layperson's terms"*. Further reference to the grammar and syntax was made when she stated that oracy involved *"an element of sophistication required in being able to put their ideas into realistic sentences"*. Tutor B recognised the **physical** dimension particularly in conjunction with the **socio-emotional** dimension of confidence. She commented that one of the challenges students face is *"physically just standing up and being removed from their peer group... physically coming to the front of people so that they're visible rather than part of the crowd"*, and the fact that they need to learn *"voice projection rather than looking at their toes"*. Unlike Tutor A, Tutor B also recognised the **cognitive** dimension in terms of the skill of reasoning. She commented that students have to be able to explain: *"If they give one word like a bullet point, that's not going to get them anywhere.*" She also recognised that *"it's a soft skill that is very relevant for work"*, and commented on the need to embed more skills work, as *"I don't think we put enough emphasis on it in terms of the soft skills that we should be building into our rounded students"*. In reflecting on the role of oracy in her teaching approach, she commented that she does not *"incorporate anything specific into my teaching"*.

Discussion

The aim of this paper was to explore if the oracy practices in two business modules were managed

as process or product, and to explore how oracy skills were perceived with reference to the Oracy Skills Framework. Situating this examination within the practice and perspectives of teachers allows insights into the awareness of oracy skills in higher education. Several themes arise from this data. First, results reveal the significance and practical implications of articulating oracy as *process* and oracy as *product* (Doherty et al. 2011). Module A focused on oracy as both process and product. This was evidenced through the awareness-raising activities of how to work in groups, as well as the focus on speaking skills in the assessment. The centrality of the rubrics to the lectures and the formative feedback further demonstrated oracy as process and product. Module B also highlighted oracy as process, again due to the focus on group work; however, although the final assessment was an oral presentation, there was little support of these skills in the content or pedagogy. In other words, there was no practice of oracy as product. This is interesting, considering that Tutor B commented on the importance of "soft skills" as a graduate attribute for employment. The importance of oracy skills needs to be central to the pedagogy as well as the content and assessment. Explicit reference to oracy skills was achieved in Module A through allocating both time and materials to their development. Oracy skills were left implicit in Module B, the assumption being that students already had these skills. Although Tutor B argued that students were in their final year, and thus had considerable experience of oral presentations, the lack of alignment between the assessment and the content indicates assumptions about students' oral skills It is worth considering, then, what makes the difference between viewing oracy as process (implicit focus) and oracy as product (explicit focus). This will be discussed below.

Second, the curriculum and the teacher perceptions demonstrated a rather restricted view of the dimensions of oracy skills. These skills were seen as providing students with cultural capital (Doherty et al. 2011) in terms of the ability to communicate in an appropriate register, but these skills were not viewed as a tool for thinking and constructing knowledge (Mah 2016), a key function of higher education. As pointed out earlier, considerable research into oracy skills in compulsory education has highlighted the significance of educational dialogue for constructing understanding with the teacher and with peers (Mercer 2000). The teachers in the study mostly viewed oracy skills in terms of their linguistic dimension, with some recognition of the physical and social and emotional dimension. Despite the presentation rubric's heavy weighting on content in Module B, the area of cognitive skills was largely ignored. Although choice of content was taught and assessed, the sub-skills of questioning, argumentation, clarification and justification were neglected. These skills have been found to be key to developing a deep understanding of a topic (Barnes 2010). Listening and building on the ideas of others are crucial to engaging in democratic participation (Michaels, O'Connor & Resnick 2008) and co-constructing understanding (Mercer & Dawes 2014). Furthermore, such cognitive skills are commonly required in the workplace.

Many of the arguments put forward for both prioritising and embedding literacy skills in the higher-education curriculum (Hathaway 2015; Wingate et al. 2011) hold true for oracy skills (Barnes 2010; Darling 2005; Howarth 2001). Jackson (2014, p. 32) argues that not all business undergraduate students will come to university with strong oral-communication skills, and states that "[higher-education] providers have a responsibility to remediate any deficiencies". My broad aim in this paper was to describe current practices of two tutors with a view to opening up the discussion of oracy skills in higher education and firmly placing the topic on the research agenda.

Recommendations for practice

Implications for pedagogic practice have emerged from the observations and interviews with the tutors. I believe that these practical ideas can go some way to embedding oracy in practice, and it

may be through these small steps that oracy skills gain more attention. I make the following suggestions to focus on oracy skills in higher-education practice.

Embedding the Oracy Skills Framework in the curriculum

One way of clarifying the notion of oracy is through the use of rubrics (Jackson 2014). Explicit reference to rubrics has been found to support self-regulation (Tsang 2017), and using rubrics for formative assessment and self-assessment can also support development of presentation skills (Ritchie 2016). The Oracy Skills Framework is a set of rubrics that can be drawn on for assessment purposes, as well as for planning, feedback and program development (Mercer et al. 2017). As the authors point out, the purpose behind the framework is not only to act as a robust and systematic way of assessing spoken skills, but to further emphasise and develop spoken skills in the curriculum. The language used in the framework is accessible to teachers and students in higher education, and is a rubric that can be used for peer review and formative feedback, putting the topic of speaking and listening skills at the heart of the activity.

The framework has already been extensively used in compulsory school contexts, and there is no reason why it cannot be exploited in a higher-education context. One key finding was that the two teachers had not considered all the dimensions of oracy skills. Reference to the framework forces a consideration of all four dimensions. As discussed above, I used the framework with Tutor B's class to scaffold the students' self-reflection on their presentation skills. It was effective in providing students with a conceptual framework to discuss their experiences of presentations. I therefore argue that the framework can be used by teachers to plan content, design rubrics, design assessment and give formative feedback. Similarly, the framework could be used with students for self- and peer evaluation. Placing the framework at the centre of teaching and learning will provide a shared understanding of the dimensions of oracy skills, as well as allow for a common language to talk about spoken academic skills. Recognition of the framework as a common tool for planning and assessing spoken academic language may affect practices beyond the classroom. For example, I argue that it can be used by Careers Service and Employability Centres in their training for interviews and assessment centres.

Ensure oracy as process and oracy as product

In planning the curriculum, it is crucial to consider the notion of constructive alignment (Biggs 2014). In doing so, teachers are encouraged to examine the links between the assessment, the learning outcomes and the pedagogic approach. If the final assessment includes an oral presentation or a debate, the learning outcomes must reflect these oral skills, and the teaching and learning strategy should support these learning outcomes. Teachers also need to be explicit about these learning outcomes and make the links between content, assessment and pedagogy clear to students. I also argue that formative feedback on oracy skills will ensure that oracy skills are incorporated as both process and product. In a higher-education context students are expected to carry out academic speaking skills such as argumentation, justification, challenging and questioning. A lack of explicit focus on teaching these skills renders oracy as process only, but explicitly teaching, developing and assessing these skills treats oracy as process *and* product.

Explicitly teach oracy skills

There is much research on teaching productively academic talk in school settings (Mercer & Dawes 2014), but little recognition of teaching such skills in higher education. Explicit teaching of oral communication skills is required for both lectures and seminars. Seminar and tutorial participation in particular depend on strong oral communication skills. Through voicing opinion

and justifying arguments students use classroom talk as a cognitive tool (Barnes 2010). It cannot be assumed that students can use these oral skills when they start in higher education (Doherty et al. 2011); instead, teachers need to make explicit reference to these skills in the learning outcomes and teach them through purposeful tasks. Tutor A pointed out that higher-education teachers may be reluctant to incorporate oracy skills development in their modules, as this may involve considerable time and effort. She also highlighted that teachers may not feel comfortable teaching oracy skills due to lack of awareness of oracy as product and explicit teaching ideas. This potential unfamiliarity points to the need for professional-development activities that highlight and demonstrate the importance of oracy skills and pedagogic approaches. Teachers must also act as models of good practice and demonstrate strong oracy skills themselves. Again, this awareness can be supported through professional-development activities organised by academic-development departments.

Professional development for teachers

Adopting a more explicit teaching focus on oracy skills requires that teachers themselves are familiar with approaches to teaching and are also models of good oracy practices. In the same way that it cannot be assumed that students have strong oracy skills, neither can it be assumed that all teachers in higher education are aware of their own performance. Professional development in the form of workshops can be offered to teachers to raise the status of oracy skills and provide practical resources for teaching. In the institution of this study I have led several workshops with teachers in which they reflect on their own performance with reference to the Oracy Skills Framework. We then discuss the utility of the framework for teaching and assessment. The importance of flexibility is key to these discussions, as certain disciplines will give different weights to the dimensions. Once the framework has been explored, we then discuss ways of encouraging students to develop oracy skills through peer learning activities. Explicit reference to rubrics in a peer-assessment context can develop spoken skills (Tsang 2017). It is crucial that teachers feel comfortable incorporating instruction in oracy skills into their pedagogy.

Limitations of the study

One possible limitation of this study is its case-study approach. This research explored two business modules in one institution; thus it is not possible to generalise from the results. However, the aim of this research was to serve as an initial exploratory study of the practices of two teachers, and it is hoped that readers will resonate with some of the findings, "even if they cannot always generalize from them" (Wellington 2015, p. 178). These findings will inform a future project that aims to embed the Oracy Skills Framework into the two modules described in this study. A further limitation is the participation of the researcher. As noted above, I took on both observer and participant-observer roles. This may have caused confusion for the students, but since the study was over a semester, my change in roles may have been mitigated by their familiarity with my presence.

Conclusion

The aim of this exploratory study was to explore and describe how teachers in a business school incorporated, taught and assessed oral communication skills with a view to making suggestions for practice. Teachers can use the Oracy Skills Framework to highlight the range of spoken skills required for effective oral communication in the business context. Further research should focus

more specifically on the genre of business presentations (Darling 2005) to further build on this framework. Placing the framework at the centre of the teaching and learning will emphasise the value of these crucial skills for both students' academic studies and their future employment contexts. In the institution in which I work I have been involved in embedding the Oracy Skills Framework into interview training, and into rubrics for speaking exams in various modules. Based on a number of presentations across the university, I have also been offering workshops to students to develop oracy skills and introduce the framework as a tool for self-reflection.

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Appendix A: Interview schedule

- What do you understand by oracy skills?
- What types of speaking activities do you use in your teaching?
- Why do you use speaking activities?
- What is the role of speaking skills in your module? How important are they?
- What features of speaking skills are essential to successful participation in your module?
- Are speaking skills assessed in your module? If so, how?
- What are the criteria for assessment?
- How do you explain these criteria to the students?
- What role do speaking skills play in your teaching approach?
- What challenges do students face with speaking skills?

Appendix B: Interview themes and worked examples

Linguistic	- whether it's, you know, accurate - it's all about oral, so that would be about listening - there is an element of sophistication required in being able to put their ideas into realistic sentences - think about, you know, the terminology is relating to your course, and I think for a lot, and I would say for the non-English speakers, they perhaps struggle with that "frame it, phrase it" in marketing-speak, is what I was saying - so using the appropriate terminology to talk about the subject rather than general lay-person's terms - what we're talking about is how you speak using business vocabulary - and it's not really about accent it's, erm, more about the content and the structure of what you're saying, it's more about illustrating that you've understood whatever the business issue is, and it's about taking business vocabulary and the complexity of business and being able to respond eloquently logically in a sort of logical - I think both – I think there is a business vocabulary - you need to have the vocabulary to be understood in business in the same way that if you were doing medicine you need to have a medical vocabulary; you know, if you're doing chemistry, chemical engineer – engineering, and chemical vocabulary, it's no different to business
Physical	- it's certainly lack of confidence standing in front of an audience physically, just standing up and being removed from their peer group; I think that's – and physically coming to the front of people so that they're visible rather than part of the crowd, and just just the voice projection rather than looking at their toes - I want to see your face and what you say, because that's half of how you're expressing it - I would certainly note down if I thought they had been confident

	speakers, so they would have a comment in their overall presentation rather than an individual mark for that; I'd comment if they had been – had an open personality or a closed one in terms of their presentation • probably quite limited, we could probably just have a session before and say, you know, about we talk about confidence and about, you know, presenting – looking up, voice projection • I've got to look at your body language
Socio-emotional	• it's certainly lack of confidence
Cognitive	• there is an element of sophistication required in being able to put their ideas into realistic sentences • yes, it's more about content • and it's not really about accent, it's more about the content and the structure of what you're saying, it's more about illustrating that you've understood whatever the business issue is, and it's about taking business vocabulary and the complexity of business and being able to respond eloquently, logically in a sort of logical • and I think there is a structure • so they don't structure their sentences, the content, the things that they need to include – the bullet point's there but the way they structure it, they would seem immature • we – what I'm using is quite broad: can I hear you? is it clear? is it – have you structured it in a logical – is it natural flow, so I think in those terms, yes, but I think those are – I think they're quite general terms rather than, you know, absolutely breaking down to the level of scientific
Definitions of oracy	• well, I understand it, I don't know whether it's, you know, accurate and I have to speak up – it's all about oral, so that would be about listening, erm, and also it would be about speaking about how students could articulate their ideas, erm, and how successful or sophisticated • it's about the skills required to be an orator to speak – to speak clearly to be understood
Employability	• well, I was saying to students, today you have been doing the marketing course – because we were giving feedback – so I said, start to think about, you know – the terminology is relating to your course, and I think for a lot – and I would say for the non-English speakers, they perhaps struggle with that "frame it, phrase it" in marketing-speak, is what I was saying • I do think it is a soft skill that is very relevant for work • it's critical – I mean, from day one you're going to have an interview, you've got to be able to speak – if you can't speak you can't really do

	business – speaking is not just the voice that we hear, it's also listening, so – and we can listen in various different ways, like, personally I think, so, you listen with your ears, you can listen with your eyes and you can talk with your eyes as well, so I think that business is done in all of those ways
Teaching oracy skills	• I'm thinking about teaching – whether they have to be taught – I think that what often happens is they will say something and they they will be asked, what do you mean by this or expand on it, so I think it comes with sort of practice • they do need some skills around that, but I also think they need some tips • probably quite limited – we could probably just have a session before and say, you know, about – we talk about confidence and about, you know, presenting – looking up, voice projection – and it would probably be just the session before, and would probably just be one session where we would focus on it, but throughout the build-up to their presentation they would have been presenting their ideas generally to the group, and to the bigger group and within their own group • just to say that you've made me think about speaking skills, and I don't think we put enough emphasis on it in terms of the soft skills that we should be building into – sort of like our rounded students, obviously they are a level 4, they have quite an understanding with [name of teacher] about sort of, like, business skills and presentations – but they might have it, but they might have help when they're doing – applying it for their placement, but I don't incorporate anything specific in my • I think that teachers don't feel comfortable teaching the soft skills – I think that they're quite – I think it takes a lot of work • go to this page, read it and next week we're going to have a test – we're going to look at chapters 3 and 4, there are books – I've got books that are supposed to be on help[ing] students, but they're useless because actually reading about it isn't helping you unless you do it, so you've actually got to do it