

TALKBACK

Gnomes of oracy

MICHAEL FERGUSON

I'd agree with Patrick Scott (*TES* October 19) the HMI's *English from 5 to 16* is not a complete bogeyman. However, as long as communication skills are characterized in the first instance by accent or intonation, then gesture, movement, and eye to eye contact, one should see at least a frowning gnome guarding the flood-gates that hold back an oracy I'd like to see the centre of the English curriculum.

Oracy must break the tag of being a kind of performing art. Talking is the prime language of all children, as Britton, Barnes and Rosen emphasized so long ago. The recent HMI discussion paper, *Bullock Revisited*, supports this with: "The primacy of the spoken word in human intercourse cannot be too strongly emphasized", and argues that pupils "need more experience as participants" in talking and listening within schools.

The way to encourage this is not to train for "appropriate" sound and movement. Classroom talk demands a particular classroom management. It demands noise. It demands patience and trust. It demands, above all, time. The move to resource-based learning has provided the context in which productive talk can take place continually. The use of tape recorders and video equipment has provided opportunities for natural, realistic performance and useful self-assessment. All this needs actual and positive support.

Will students perceive the value of their normal discourse when it is

fostered mainly through role-play or formal debate? Will they gain confidence through the experience of "class" discussion often dominated by the intentional, or more worrying, unintentional authority of the teacher? Students need classroom talk to occur continually as a part of their reading and writing activities and as a valuable learning experience in itself. The management of this needs careful thought and planning. Teachers need to feel confident about pupil talk before they'll discard the security of their own voices.

Chalk and talk has begun to choke on its own dusty air. Will *English from 5 to 16* just become an extractor fan to this slow but encouraging start? The letter from Dore, Hoyes, Latham and William (again *TES*, October 19) tackles one of the essential worries generated by this document: just what oral provision will there be in future examinations? Their expertise in oral assessment needs encouragement and expansion too – not the cold shoulder.

My experience of examining oral work in a GCE Mode 3 English language syllabus would support the letter writers' view that such assessment is not only viable but essential for sustaining any integral role for oracy in the English curriculum. There has to be some such recognition of the importance of oracy within any examination system.

If the Schools Examining Council does indeed "not include oral assessment as an integral part of the national criteria for English" it will be tragic. Less devastating, but equally dispiriting, are submissions for GCSE which offer aural examinations – the mere tokens to the development of positive oral skills. We need tests which assess and therefore encourage the oracy that can take place naturally and continually in the classroom.

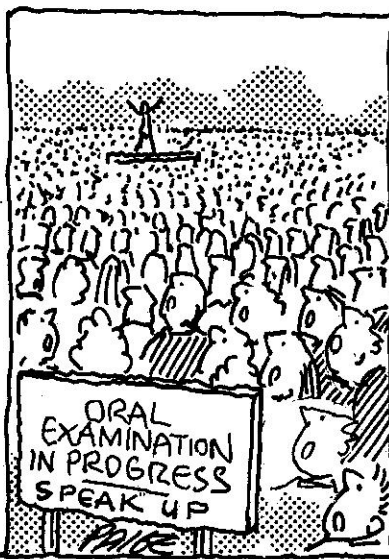
The Assessment of Performance Units report, *Language Performance in schools*, concludes that the complex-

ities of assessment can be achieved: tasks can be constructed with natural as well as testing contexts, and monitoring can be structured to accommodate the spread of content and performance within all talking and listening activities.

I hope the response to *English from 5 to 16* will confront this issue. For many teachers it's a radical move to shift the emphasis in the class from writing to talking. We all need materials, theoretical and practical, with which to make such adjustments.

The Resources for Learning and Development Unit in Bristol provides excellent resources that encourage classroom talk for all ages. There are others, but too few. Such resources will not materialize, particularly through the educational publishers, until the theoretical and practical recognition has been confirmed and properly endorsed.

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Have a go artists

DAVID ORME

The best use of finite resources to bring arts into schools needs to be considered urgently, now that the Arts Council, the regional arts associations and other organisations are getting increasingly involved in education.

The current major funding effort is directed at bringing together artmakers – sculptors, painters, writers, dancers – and school pupils or college students. Contacts may be a day's visit to the school or college where the artist may lecture, perform, run workshops and so on. These can provide an exciting stimulus to the work in a particular department, but the effects are bound to be ephemeral – the artist seen as a special visitor rather than someone providing the sustained support a young artist requires.

Regional arts associations are looking now to provide more long-term visits by offering residencies for a year or more. Increasingly, these are being taken up by various educational establishments. Artists, apart from continuing their own work, will spend some time working with staff and students. This is clearly more useful, allowing an extended period of contact with students and the possibility of creative dialogue.

Its problem is one of scale, and I wonder whether arts administrators, used to the relatively small-scale nature of most art initiatives, have yet grasped the enormity of the task in servicing 10,000 secondary schools and higher education institutes, and more than twice that number of primaries.

Even assuming limitless funding, the supply of writers, painters, dancers and the like ready and willing to work in education would soon dry up.

Inevitably most arts education in school is provided by specialised teaching staff. I propose that the main thrust of art in education should be toward's in-service work for teachers. This would take the form of teachers in various disciplines working with artists and writers to improve and develop their own artistic skills and insights. New skills learnt could be disseminated. Increased confidence in art-making ability would allow the teacher to assume the role of co-artist". This would be particularly useful for English teachers, who are generally far less willing to "have a go" than colleagues in other departments where the principle of teaching by example is more securely based. While, from the pupils point of view, contact would be second-hand more often than not, this is surely better than no contact at all.

The problems with this approach stem mainly from inflexibility in the arts and education spheres. Arts administrators will insist that in-service training is the concern of local authorities. They in turn will point to their already overstretched in-service budget, and make it clear that it cannot accommodate what will be seen as "peripheral" areas.

It is to be hoped these problems can be resolved. One possible solution is to give teachers regular access to artists-in-residence by placing them in a teachers' centre or local college of education, with workshops for local teachers an important part of the brief. I would like to think that applications for residencies from such institutions would be given positive encouragement.

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Tarnished

singly, in the streets of Ipswich one night after school. By sheer chance, I met one of our ex-pupils who failed in the summer, despite my firm belief

check the marking and adding-up for all internal English exams and I expect my colleagues to do the same with papers I mark. Yet the AEB, with well

ment after the story hit the headlines in the local press. That was probably a wise decision, bearing in mind that papers from other local centres were

● What has the AEB done to ensure such a distressing situation never occurs again?

"Distressing" accurately conveys