

4 ORACY SKILL SETS - A GUIDE

Four key verbal communication skill sets lie at the centre of our oracy provision and underpin the development and delivery of all of our programmes: Reasoning and Evidence; Organisation and Prioritisation; Listening and Response; and Expression and Delivery.

Focus on these areas across our teaching, resources and competitions provides a clear and consistent framework for learning and assessment.

This guide explains these four skill sets and lays out some of the reasons they are so useful in the classroom and valuable to all-round education.

Reasoning and Evidence

Reasoning and evidence denotes the argumentation skills students need. It reflects the ability of students to explain and justify the positions they take.

A persuasive speaker:

- · Chooses relevant statements to defend
- Defends statements using clear, logical reasons
- Supports their arguments with well-explained evidence

In the classroom -

Cognitive skills:

Debate helps students to develop their **cognitive skills**. This broad term refers to a set of unfixed mental abilities and methods that are the foundation of learning. Cognitive skills include concentration, memory, goal-setting and self-talk. These skills underpin students' learning in all aspects of their school life (and outside school).

We know this because small scale studies of the effect of debating have shown an improvement in students' performance in Cognitive Abilities Tests (CATs). Larger scale studies on similar programmes such as Philosophy for Children have also shown an improvement in performance on these tests. There is a wealth of research that reports that teachers and students believe that they have achieved better academic results as a consequence of involvement in debating.

Metacognitive skills:

Metacognition ("thinking about thinking") is an even broader term, referring to thoughts and processes students have about their learning. This can include strategies for setting goals/ targets to focus your own learning; it can also include the ability to evaluate the strategies you are using to solve a problem.

Debate promotes students' metacognitive skills directly, by teaching strategies for evaluating ideas or idea-generating methods. (E.g. when teaching students how to prepare for a debate) It is also an excellent opportunity to teach metacognitive skills **indirectly** through the promotion of a peer-to-peer and self-assessment **feedback culture**. High quality feedback does not just tell a student "how to do something". It is instead an opportunity to boost their metacognitive skills by teaching students how to self-evaluate and improve.



An expanded knowledge base:

We know (because of extensive educational research) that having a wide knowledge base aids student learning in a wide variety of ways - ranging from the obvious benefits in terms of aiding conceptual understanding; to the value of knowledge in promoting student literacy (including 'academic literacy' - reading complex texts at a high level - not just primary school kids learning to read and write).

This fact often results in a widening gap between the most able and least able students, sometimes referred to as the Matthew Effect: "To all who have, more will be given" (Matthew 25:29). This knowledge base also provides students with the cultural capital that they need to thrive in college and university environments.

Debating exposes students to a wide knowledge base, both in terms of 'facts about the world' and theoretical and political thought. It provides the motivation and the context needed to understand and retain this information.

Listening and Response

Debate provides a range of opportunities for students to engage with the ideas of others. This skill set reflects their willingness and ability to do so.

A persuasive speaker:

- Demonstrates attentive listening by engaging with the ideas of others
- Responds to others with precise analysis or questioning, supporting or challenging their ideas
- Uses good judgement to select and respond to the most important arguments in the debate

In the classroom -

Cognitive skills:

Listening and response activities also promote **cognitive skills**. It is actually quite a difficult thing to listen to what someone has said, find and remember the key points, think of a response, think of how to present the response and then actually present the response without forgetting any of this along the way.

A key link here is, again, to students' written work, where they spend time working on summarising and paraphrasing in order to establish meaning. This vital component of literacy is also developed when students work on listening and response activities.

Emotional and social skills:

Teachers also monitor and develop students' emotional and social skills. Of particular relevance for us are students' interpersonal skills - **teamwork** is a critical skill developed through debating. Good teamwork activities need to have a common goal (performance of the team as a whole) and individual accountability (your own speech) to be effective, and debate prep fulfils these criteria.

Students also develop their **emotional regulation** (manifesting emotions in a socially appropriate way) through the use of scalable competition, **turn-taking** and rule-bound activities.



Active listening and class discussions:

Teachers are often highly motivated to include class discussions and groupwork/student-led activities in their classes. Most PGCE courses emphasise their value (which is well-documented). However, in many cases these activities fail to reach their potential because students have not been instructed in the requisite foundational skills.

Debating teaches students the value of 'active listening'. Whilst students may think of 'listening' as simply being quiet whilst someone else is talking; speech and debate activities offer an accountable means of practising oral comprehension - attending to and remembering key information that is delivered verbally.

Speech and debate activities also teach students the **turn-taking conventions and vocabulary** to take part in high quality class discussions (for example, sentence starters such as "I agree because..." "Building on what Luna said..."). Studies have shown that teachers report an improvement in the quality of class discussions when students take part in speech and debate activities.

Regular speech and debate instruction also **increases student participation** in discussion activities (which may previously have been dominated by a small number of students). Students feel more confident in their contributions, understand the teacher's expectations when participating in discussion and are more likely to believe that making strong contributions in discussions is a skill anyone can learn.

Organisation and Prioritisation

Debates require quick thinking and the clear articulation of ideas. This skill set reflects students' ability to convey their ideas clearly and effectively.

A persuasive speaker:

- Presents their reasons in a clear, well-structured manner. Their arguments are easy to follow, and ideas may be grouped by theme
- Gives priority to the main arguments, and spends less time on those that are not as important
- Has a structure which is clearly communicated to the audience, perhaps including an introduction and conclusion

In the classroom -

Structure and thought:

The structures that we teach students to use in debating and public speaking are the same as the ones they will use when writing essays in school. Debate primes students to use logical structure and write persuasively.

At heart, structuring a speech is the art of talking, writing and thinking precisely. It is the ability to distinguish one idea from another; to hone vague thoughts into sharp points. This is an immensely powerful intellectual tool that is transferable to students' academic life; but most of all empowers students to engage critically with the political and social world.



Expression and Delivery

Expression and delivery brings debating apart from competitive essay-writing. Students need to be able to convey their thoughts with their audience in mind.

A persuasive speaker:

- Speaks with confidence, as indicated by voice, body language and the use of notes for reference (rather than reading a script)
- Engages the audience with variations in the tone and volume of their voice
- Chooses vocabulary and sentence structure carefully, to maximise their rhetorical impact

In the classroom -

Speech and fear:

Lots of people are afraid of public speaking. It has been reliably found that 3 in 4 people experience anxiety and fear before speaking in public.

Debating combats this in two ways: first, by the simple means of **providing opportunities to speak** in front of small and large audiences, and thus developing techniques to manage and minimise anxiety or fear. Most students will otherwise have very few opportunities to speak in front of others.

Second, speech and debate activities help students to develop a **growth mindset** in regards to public speaking. In other words, to believe that the ability to speak in front of others is something that you can develop and improve, rather that something you either have or you don't (having a fixed mindset). The value of a growth mindset is noted throughout field of education.

Confidence:

We can think about confidence as being either internal or external. Someone with 'internal confidence' but lacking in 'external confidence' may believe that they are quite smart, and have good ideas, but be unwilling to speak up in discussions for fear of ridicule or other social opprobrium.

Conversely, someone with 'external confidence' but lacking in 'internal confidence' may present as your typical class clown - someone who is very happy to be the centre of attention, loud and talkative, but secretly believes that they aren't very clever and don't have any good ideas to share, and so jokes around as a means of avoiding making serious contributions.

Speech and debate activities provide a route for students with varying levels and types of confidence to engage in public, thoughtful discussion. The variety of activities and approaches to speaking allow students to move on the edges of their comfort zone, wherever that may be, and thus develop their confidence.

Someone who was previously lacking in internal confidence may see particular gains in their written work, and in their ability to make serious contributions in class discussions (or contributions at all in more intimidating environments like college/university seminars or meetings). Someone who was previously lacking in external confidence may see particular gains in their ability to share their ideas with others, for example in group discussions, as well as to take part in public speaking events (such as presentations).