

- For teachers across every subject

ORACY AND SPOKEN LANGUAGE SKILLS

Talking well breaks down into four separate skills

Built by Cambridge researchers working with School 21 in London, and trialled with Year 7 classes in two English secondary schools. The four strands themselves are meant to describe talk in any subject or classroom.

Researchers narrowed eight categories of talk skill down to four (physical, linguistic, cognitive, social and emotional) through three rounds with an eight-person expert panel, not by testing which categories were correct. Their own classroom trial afterwards was too small to prove any teaching approach worked better.

● ● ● Evidence: Promising

Empirical, statistical validation that four strands are the correct structure, supported by adequately powered classroom comparisons.



Eight categories, narrowed to four

Cambridge researchers spent around 14 months building a way to describe what "good at talking" actually means. They began by reviewing existing frameworks and testing schemes, then consulted an eight-person expert panel covering drama, English, sociolinguistics, applied linguistics and assessment, alongside teachers, speech therapists and national bodies including Cambridge Assessment and the National Literacy Trust. The panel met three times over the course of the project. Their first version of the framework had eight categories. Discussion and feedback narrowed it to four: physical, linguistic, cognitive, and social and emotional.

Physical	2 skills
Linguistic	3 skills
Cognitive	4 skills
Social & Emotional	4 skills

Named skill groups inside each strand (13 in total), from the published Oracy Skills Framework diagram, Voice 21 & University of Cambridge, 2018.

What's inside each strand

1

Physical

Voice and body language: fluency, pace, tone, pronunciation, projection, gesture, posture, eye contact.

2

Linguistic

Vocabulary choice, register and grammar, plus rhetorical technique such as metaphor and humour.

3

Cognitive

Choosing content, structuring talk, clarifying and summarising, and giving reasons for a view.

4

Social & Emotional

Working with others, listening and responding, confidence, and reading your audience.

Across your subjects and classes

The four strands came from expert consensus and a review of existing frameworks, not a test of which categories are correct. What follows are sensible ways teachers use them: worth trying, not proven to raise attainment.

Subject	How the four strands could help
Science	Use Cognitive (reasoning, evidence) to check learners are backing claims with data, not just Linguistic vocabulary.
English	Use Linguistic (rhetorical technique, register) alongside Cognitive (structure) when giving feedback on a persuasive speech.
Drama	Lean on Physical (voice projection, pace, gesture) as the main lens for feedback.
Humanities	Use Social and Emotional (audience awareness, turn-taking) to coach learners who dominate or go quiet in discussion.
MFL	Use Physical and Linguistic together: pronunciation and register matter as much as vocabulary recall.

Adapt it to the class in front of you

Quiet or reluctant

Start with Social and Emotional: build confidence and turn-taking before pushing for polished content.

Talks a lot, says little

Lean on Cognitive: ask for structure and reasons, not just more words.

Confident but rambling

Use Linguistic and Cognitive together: vocabulary choice and structure, to sharpen what's already fluent.

Strong ideas, quiet delivery

Lean on Physical: voice projection, pace and eye contact, so the ideas actually land.

A well-built practical tool, not a proven map of the mind

Developing

This rates how solid the evidence is, not how useful the framework is. A funded, two-year research programme built the four strands by structured consensus, not by testing what oracy is scientifically made of.

- The four categories came from expert discussion and a review of existing frameworks, not from testing which split is correct. The researchers started with eight categories and narrowed them to four.
- The researchers say so themselves: the framework is written to be usable by teachers, not to satisfy "the rigorous criteria of an academic linguist," and may lack subtlety in the eyes of applied linguists.
- The one classroom trial in the paper (12 learners in each of two schools) was explicitly too small for the researchers to call any difference between schools statistically significant. It cannot be used to prove the framework "works."

What that means for you: treat the four strands as a shared, teacher-tested vocabulary for noticing and planning talk, not as a scientifically validated model of how spoken language skill is built.

TRY IT THIS WEEK

Your first small step

THIS WEEK

Before your next discussion task, pick one strand, physical, linguistic, cognitive, or social and emotional, and give feedback only on that.

Try it and watch: notice which strand a learner is strongest in, and which one holds them back. That's your own evidence, not the researchers'. Part of their own motivation for building this framework was to give spoken language the same status as literacy and numeracy in how it gets taught and noticed.

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