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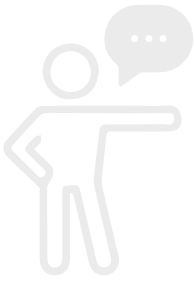
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ORACY

The term “oracy,” which Wilkinson (1965) coined using an analogy with “literacy” to connote an acquired skill, defines a “condition of learning” that spreads across all disciplines in education: the ability to understand and use spoken language. This ability, also referred to as the “Talk” competency in the context of English Language Arts instruction, requires a learning and assessment framework that reaches beyond the evaluation of the students’ talking skills; oracy also involves cognition, metacognition, linguistics, social and emotional response, and physical behaviour. Hence, the integration of those components into the educators’ assessment toolbox is essential to reflect the students’ experience of language-learning. In this report, we examine aspects of current English Language Arts (ELA) curricula and assessment practices in Canada, analyze the tools created to support oracy development, and compare them with existing research on oracy.



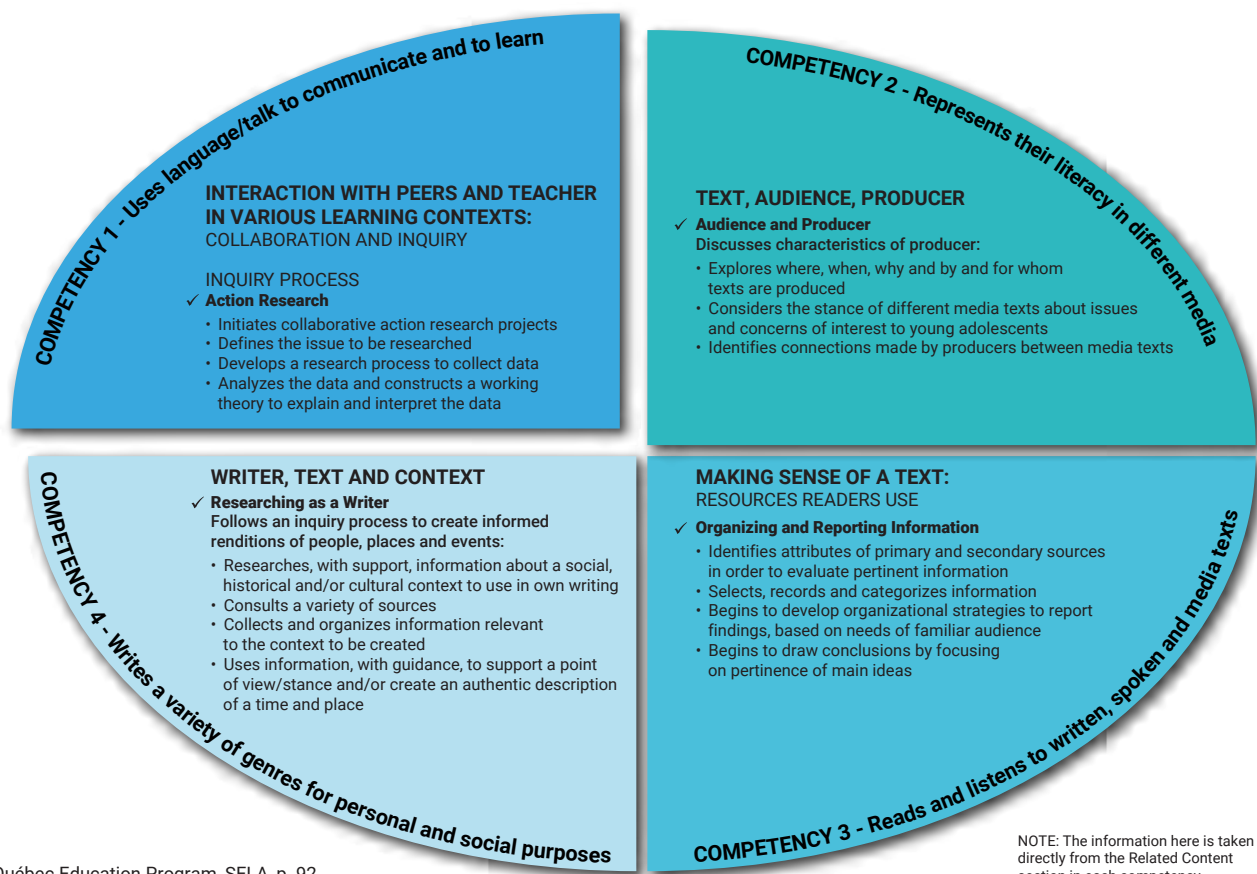
CURRENT CURRICULUM IN QUÉBEC

Oracy is equally interwoven throughout the elementary and secondary English Language Arts programs. In the Elementary ELA program “[t]he focus of [the Talk] competency is language in use for communicating and for learning, i.e. oral discourse used in all its varieties, with a special emphasis on active learning through talk. For the student, using language in its communicative and cognitive functions is the principal means for the development of the range of language strategies needed for literacy” p. 99, (QEP).

In the secondary programs—Cycles One and Two—oracy corresponds to the student’s capacity to “use language/talk to communicate and to learn.” The Talk competency includes engagement in meaningful dialogue, recognition of meaning and of non-verbal cues, demonstration of control, expression of point of view and ideas, contribution of information, integration of new ways of thinking, precision of communication, adjustment and modification of register, tone, and voice depending on the audience, etc. As such, the student must showcase an understanding of language-learning processes (reading, producing, researching), of the structures, features, codes and conventions of the required genres (e.g. narrative, expository, argumentative, etc.), of the conventions of language (spoken, written, media), and of the communication of ideas.

This alignment and intentional trajectory over time is one of the strengths of the ELA programs.

Example of Integrating Competencies Through Talk



CURRENT ASSESSMENT PRACTICES AND CURRICULA IN OTHER PROVINCES

In British Columbia, educators' assessment of ELA rests on the following categories: engaging and questioning, processing, analyzing, recognizing identity and voice, and constructing and creating (Framework for Classroom Assessment, 2016, p. 6). Included in their assessment resources is a tool that students can use to evaluate how effective, clear/understandable, relevant, appropriate and impactful their communication is, using a "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" chart (Classroom Assessment Resource Package, n.d., p. 17). Students also use a self-assessment tool to reflect on their performance and identify their challenges ("I am working on"), abilities ("I can") and strengths ("I am strong in"), respectively corresponding to levels of proficiency: (1) emerging/developing, (2) proficient and (3) extending. However, these terms do not appear in the document, so the students can "focus on their next steps and growth rather than on grades" (p. 18). This attention to process over product, and transformation over a transactional learning approach, set this program above others and is worthy of commendation.

[Formative assessment tools can help students] "focus on their next steps and growth rather than on grades"

(British Columbia's Ministry of Education. (n.d.). Classroom Assessment Resources Package, P. 18.)

In Atlantic Canada—Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick—the communication competency requires students to be able to explore, reflect and express ideas presented through a variety of media, to access, process, evaluate and share information, to demonstrate an understanding of facts and relationships presented through words, numbers and symbols, to interpret and express data in everyday language, etc. As an outcome, students are expected to "become increasingly competent in their ability to communicate with confidence and eloquence," to build "skills in social language use" (both in formal and informal situations), and to be able to "communicate clearly and effectively" with the "correct and appropriate use of language conventions and mechanics" (Foundation for Atlantic Canada, n.d., p. 7).

In Alberta, the general outcome of ELA is to enable students to discover, explore, clarify, extend and respond to texts, to use strategies and cues, to understand elements of form and technique, to create original content, to plan, manage and focus on ideas, to select, process, organize, record and evaluate data, to enhance and attend to discussion, to share and review ideas, to respect others and to strengthen community (Program of Studies, 2000, p. 4).

RESEARCH ON ORACY

“Oracy is foundational to learning, at any age and in all subjects. Not only should it be developed in and of itself but it is a means of learning right across the curriculum.” (Jones, 2017, p. 498).

Research demonstrates that talk fundamentally impacts children’s learning and thinking development (Vygotsky, 1962). Some even claim that it is “the most important educational tool for guiding the development of understanding and for jointly constructing knowledge” (Mercer & Hodgkinson, 2008, p. xi). As such, it influences children’s acquisition of knowledge, enhances their vocabulary development and widens their range of verbal expression and cognitive abilities (Hart & Risley, 1995). Talk also encourages the establishment of communication skills that enable children to express their ideas and wants clearly, make sure others understand them, respond to others’ ideas and wants, and become familiar with conversation etiquette (ibid.). As children acquire these oracy skills, they learn “to express, convey, mediate and manage actions, emotions and knowledge,” thus showing that language is “inextricably tied to local social, emotional and cognitive experiences” (Baquedano-López, 2003, p. 66). Moreover, the aptitudes developed through talk range beyond cognition and learning, as they also relate to “identities, a sense of self, and what it means to be human” (Jones, 2017, p. 507).

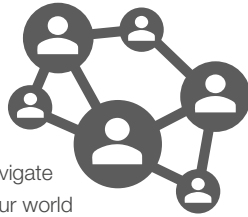
In that regard, some argue that dialogic pedagogy helps students transfer their classroom learnings out into the world: dialogue is a “purposive social action, as well as a vital ingredient of effective teaching and a worthy educational end in itself, and hence a manifesto for hope” (Alexander, 2019, p. E14). To be effective, this sort of practice must “trickle down into the students’ ability to reflect how their dialogue is connected to the larger society they live in” (Andal, 2019, C2). This can be achieved if students are incited to exercise cognitive skills through dialogue and socialization: these interactions train them to formulate their ideas and compare their opinions to those of others using “responses, which involve uptake or ratification, challenge, or even reframing” (Baquedano-López, 2003, p. 69), all of which require an understanding of both social and global context.

ANALYSIS OF THE ORACY SKILLS TOOL

The *Oracy Skills* tool divides the oracy skills into five categories of assets; these categories tend to overlap and complement one another.

ORACY SKILLS

Oracy enables us to navigate our own learning and our world through the skills and processes of talking and listening.



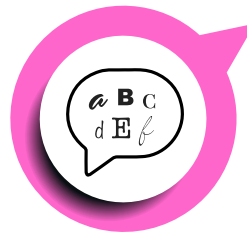
METACOGNITIVE

- Develops as a learner and a thinker
 - Reflects on self as a communicator (approaches, strategies, skills)
 - Uses understanding of oracy to grow as a communicator and a learner
 - Recognizes the value of their own contributions and their impact



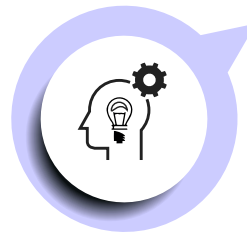
PHYSICAL

- Voice
 - **Fluency (pace, flow)**
 - **Tonal variation (intonation, pitch, expression)**
 - **Clarity (enunciation)**
 - **Projection** (volume)
- Body language
 - Gestures
 - Facial expression
 - Eye contact
 - Posture



LINGUISTIC

- Language
 - **Register**
 - Vocabulary
 - Word choice
 - **Grammar**
 - Pronunciation
- **Stylistic features**
 - Uses language to engage the audience
- **Rhetorical strategies**
 - Uses language to convey meaning and provoke a response



COGNITIVE

- Communicates ideas and information
 - Expresses thoughts, ideas, and points of view to convey meaning and intention
 - Builds on own views and the views of others
- Organizes, structures and adjusts talk and thinking
 - Understands the context of the communication
- Negotiates meaning
 - Gathers and processes information
 - Connects to prior knowledge and understanding
 - Clarifies
 - Questions
 - Summarizes
 - Infers
 - Synthesizes
- Thinks critically
 - Gives reasons to support views
 - Critically examines ideas and views expressed
- Considers interplay between context, **audience** and purpose
 - Reads the audience
 - Makes deliberate physical, linguistic, and, social and emotional choices to meet the needs of the audience



SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL

- Collaborates
 - Participates in group activities in a variety of ways
- Interacts respectfully and constructively
 - Expresses empathy
 - Develops positive and supportive attitudes towards peers
- **Listens actively**
 - Engages cognitively and may engage physically
- Demonstrates self-confidence



METACOGNITIVE

Develops as a learner and thinker

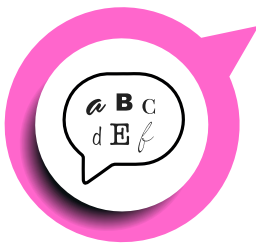
Research shows that oracy encourages students to practice metacognition and to become more aware of their own aptitudes. This can become a challenge for educators, who must offer “more opportunities for students to pause and engage into analyzing *why* they speak, not only *what* they have to speak about and *how* to do it” (Andal, 2019, p. C2). As they notice the progression of their language-learning through speech and socialization, children notably “become aware of their own thought process,” which “helps them gain control over *how* they learn” and allows them to “evaluate progress and set targets for improvement” (Jones, 2008, p. 14).



COGNITIVE

Communicates ideas and information, organizes, structures and adjusts talk and thinking, negotiates meaning, thinks critically and considers interplay between context, audience and purpose

Wilkinson (1970) described oracy as a process of “verbalization of experience” in which ideas are communicated with words. Indeed, oracy requires the speaker’s mastery of their idea, but also their understanding of how to convey it efficiently and clearly. To complete such a task, children must learn how “to explain, elaborate, and connect their ideas” in order to “think, organize their thoughts, and produce language,” which are all essential steps towards helping them “make sense of decontextualized language” (McKeown, M.G., and Beck, 2005, p. 293). Hence, the act of talking invites them to sort out and communicate their ideas, but also to practice critical thinking.



LINGUISTIC

Language, stylistic features and rhetorical strategies

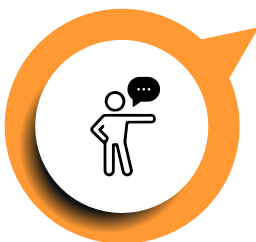
Some studies indicate that exposing children to a wide array of spoken language experiences and a diverse vocabulary makes a significant difference in their language development as well as their literacy development in later years (Hart & Risley, 1999). Children will also assimilate the language of their community (Hoff, 2005) and learn “the symbolic systems shared by members of one’s cultural group that are used to classify reality in the world,” and therefore, they “develop interpretive skills mediated through language,” (Baquedano-López, 2003, p. 66).



SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL

Collaborates, interacts respectfully and constructively, listens actively and demonstrates self-assurance

Researchers have observed that the social and emotional benefits of oracy manifest themselves early in childhood (Hart & Risley, 1995) and continue into adulthood in the form of more “creative, generative” uses of language. Plus, “instead of just being competent at producing sentences, speakers are competent in producing sentences *in socially acceptable ways*” (Baquedano-López, 2003, p. 67), which lead to the development of respect and empathy. In the context of dialogic pedagogy, the model of classroom debates serves as an example in which “the logic of negotiation primes participants to be broad-minded and other-regarding” (Andal, 2019, C4).



PHYSICAL

Voice and body language

Studies also denote that oracy relies on the use of body language, which requires children to be aware of their posture, gestures, facial expressions and use of eye contact when talking. Such physical behaviours can influence the projection of the voice in space, the addition of meaning or the focus on certain aspects of the speech. Ultimately, all those effects can impact children’s control of their speech as well as their confidence and clarity (Clements & Tobin, 2021).

ANALYSIS OF THE ORACY CONTINUA

The oracy continua guide both educators and students in the development of oracy using a scale to situate the students' level of proficiency. It is important to note that these are formative assessment tools that have been developed to inform teaching and help teachers focus feedback on specific communication skills. In our educational spaces we must combat the tendency to always apply rubrics to produce grades; instead, we need formative assessment tools and guides to focus on transformation over time. The oracy continua are complementary tools – that is, they work together with the *Oracy Skills* tool.

The cognitive, physical, linguistic and, social and emotional strands in the *Oracy Skills* carry over into the continua and are showcased at the very top. The main assets from the *Oracy Skills* tool are reiterated for each strand. They are colour-coded accordingly and provide a progression of observable descriptors for each of the strands from beginning all the way through to accomplished that translate what each of the skills might look like in action.


The *Developmental Continuum of Oracy Skills for Planning Instruction and Providing Feedback* is a resource that teachers can use to fine-tune their practice and to plan talk tasks. Given that the skills are isolated, it can also help teachers provide focused and purposeful feedback.

The *Developmental Continuum of Oracy Skills for Student Reflection and Goal-Setting* reflects the metacognitive thread that runs throughout all three ELA programs. The language of the descriptors, while similar to the teacher version, invokes the use of personal pronouns that are designed to help students connect to the progression of their own skills. This continuum can help students articulate where they want to improve. It can serve as a guide in teacher and peer conferencing, as a tool for goal-setting and for self-assessment.

The oracy assets in all three tools are common to all types of talk. Whether it be explorational or presentational talk, students need explicit instruction to acquire and then hone their physical, linguistic, cognitive and social and emotional skills.

The oracy tools were created to help teachers understand the importance of a talk-based curriculum and their role in supporting oracy development. The continua make the acquisition and perfection of these skills clear, effective, useful and relevant. The intention is to help 21st century learners develop crucial rhetorical literacy, digital and information literacy, and communication competencies that will support them in navigating complex and rapidly changing socio-political and economic realities in local and global contexts.

DEVELOPMENTAL CONTINUUM OF ORACY SKILLS FOR PLANNING INSTRUCTION AND PROVIDING FEEDBACK

PHYSICAL	LINGUISTIC	COGNITIVE	SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Voice Body language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Language Stylistic features Rhetorical strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communicates ideas and information Organizes, structures and adjusts talk and thinking Negotiates meaning Thinks critically Considers interplay between context, audience and purpose 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaborates Interacts respectfully and constructively Listens actively Demonstrates self-confidence 

In a variety of talk contexts, both formal and informal, the student:

EXTENDING

<p>Masters the use of voice and body language and uses them deliberately to connect with and/or make an impact on the audience. Varies, adapts and controls these skills with ease.</p>	<p>Adapts register, adjusts word choice and uses specific vocabulary effectively and accurately for a range of contexts, purposes and audiences. Integrates stylistic features and rhetorical strategies skilfully and purposefully.</p>	<p>Has internalized the cognitive skills to communicate with ease. Tailors content and delivery to audience, adjusts talk as needed (can ad-lib). Processes and synthesizes information and ideas to fuel discussion and advance thinking.</p>	<p>Listens actively by interacting purposefully, respectfully and with flexibility. Communicates in a highly engaging manner; has a rapport with the audience. Chooses to lead or defer to another speaker when beneficial for group cohesion or audience interaction.</p>
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CONSOLIDATING

<p>Varies, adapts and controls voice and body language in light of context, purpose and audience.</p>	<p>Uses their understanding of register in light of purpose, context and audience. Makes deliberate word choices and employs a more extensive vocabulary. Employs and expands upon a growing repertoire of stylistic features and rhetorical strategies.</p>	<p>Makes connections and can expand on ideas. Purposefully chooses strategies to share ideas with clarity; persuade, convince, inform, entertain to meet the needs of the audience. Acknowledges and considers different perspectives. Analyses, selects and organizes pertinent information to fuel a discussion; explain, support, defend or rebut a position.</p>	<p>Listens actively by considering and responding to the feelings and ideas of others. Reads their audience and adapts communication to connect with them. Contributes in an assured manner through constructive and positive interactions.</p>
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DEVELOPING

<p>Builds control of voice and body language and starts to use them to communicate in a variety of situations.</p>	<p>Experiments with register in light of a growing awareness of purpose and audience. Explores the versatility of words and increases vocabulary. Begins to use familiar stylistic features.</p>	<p>Expresses and supports ideas related to the topic and/or purpose. Begins to read the audience and experiments with physical, linguistic and social and emotional skills to meet their needs. Experiments with a range of strategies: questions, clarifies, gives examples, explains, summarizes, builds on ideas to construct meaning.</p>	<p>Follows social conventions for talk in a variety of contexts. Demonstrates listening using a variety of verbal and non-verbal responses. Builds confidence in own opinions by contributing thoughts or ideas to support learning/meaning in a variety of contexts.</p>
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BEGINNING

<p>Explores different ways to utilize voice. Uses gestures to support developing linguistic and cognitive skills.</p>	<p>Adopts a register for a familiar audience and context. Uses familiar vocabulary and attempts to use new words. Is acquiring a working knowledge of grammar.</p>	<p>Shares own ideas. Develops an emerging awareness of purpose and audience. Adjusts thinking and organizes ideas when questioned, encouraged or supported.</p>	<p>Understands social conventions of communication: waiting their turn, listening when others are speaking. Expresses thoughts, ideas or understanding, sometimes tentatively, as their self confidence grows.</p>
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BEFORE BEGINNING

Behaviours and skills not yet at the beginning level do not appear on the continuum.

- This continuum shows the development of oracy skills. Refer to the *Oracy Skills* tool for more details.
- These descriptors provide an overview of what oracy skills could look like in action. They are NOT an exhaustive list.
- Levels build upon each other. Higher levels assume that students have already mastered the skills in the previous steps.
- Terms in **BOLD** are defined in the *Glossary of Oracy Terms*.
- Oracy skill development requires explicit instruction, scaffolding and practice in a variety of contexts.

DEVELOPMENTAL CONTINUUM OF ORACY SKILLS FOR STUDENT REFLECTION AND GOAL-SETTING

METACOGNITIVE



- **I am developing as a learner and a thinker.**
 - I reflect on myself as a communicator (approaches, strategies, skills).
 - I use my understanding of oracy to grow as a communicator and a learner.
 - I recognize the value of my own contributions and their impact.

PHYSICAL <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Voice ▪ Body language 	LINGUISTIC <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Language ▪ Stylistic features ▪ Rhetorical strategies 	COGNITIVE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Communicates ideas and information ▪ Organizes, structures and adjusts talk and thinking ▪ Negotiates meaning ▪ Thinks critically ▪ Considers interplay between context, audience and purpose 	SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Collaborates ▪ Interacts respectfully and constructively ▪ Listens actively ▪ Demonstrates self-confidence
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EXTENDING

<p>I can skilfully and deliberately use my voice and body language to make an impact on my audience.</p>	<p>I choose from a wide range of linguistic skills to engage my audience and evoke responses.</p> <p>I can play with language skilfully and purposefully.</p>	<p>I choose strategies that enhance communication.</p> <p>I can anticipate the response of my audience and make choices accordingly.</p> <p>My participation and contributions have the intended effect on my audience in light of the purpose.</p>	<p>I listen actively and respond to my audience with awareness and sensitivity.</p> <p>I build rapport and engagement with my audience with ease.</p> <p>I can adjust my contributions for the audience and respond accordingly to enhance interaction, collaboration or cohesion.</p>
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CONSOLIDATING

<p>I am aware of the impact of my voice and body language and adapt them as needed.</p>	<p>I use language effectively with awareness of my purpose, the context and my audience.</p> <p>I choose words with care and have a wide vocabulary.</p>	<p>I participate in many facets of a discussion.</p> <p>I support my ideas and opinions with pertinent information and consider different perspectives.</p> <p>I am aware of my purpose and audience and can adjust my talk based on their response.</p>	<p>I listen actively to others and contribute thoughtfully and respectfully.</p> <p>I can read the verbal and non verbal cues of my audience and connect with them.</p> <p>I am confident contributing in a varied range of contexts and with a broader audience.</p>
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DEVELOPING

<p>I am learning to use my voice and body language to communicate in different situations.</p>	<p>I use language to express myself in different ways depending on my purpose and audience.</p> <p>I work on building vocabulary to use in different situations and for specific topics.</p> <p>I explore the impact of my style and grammar for my purpose and audience.</p>	<p>I explain and develop my ideas.</p> <p>I can recognize the needs of my audience. I notice their response to what I am saying.</p> <p>I use strategies like questioning and summarizing, and sometimes build on the ideas of others.</p>	<p>I practice social conventions in different talk situations to maintain respectful and productive interactions.</p> <p>I listen and respond constructively when talking with others.</p> <p>I am comfortable taking risks when expressing my ideas.</p>
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BEGINNING

<p>I can change the way I speak and use body language to communicate.</p>	<p>I try different ways of speaking depending on my purpose and audience.</p> <p>I use familiar vocabulary and try out new words.</p> <p>I am working on using correct grammar.</p>	<p>I share my ideas.</p> <p>I can take my ideas farther and adjust my thinking after listening to and talking with others.</p>	<p>I listen to others, wait my turn and participate either verbally or physically.</p> <p>I express myself with growing confidence depending on context and audience.</p> <p>I sometimes need encouragement when I share my ideas.</p>
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BEFORE BEGINNING

Behaviours and skills not yet at the beginning level do not appear on the continuum.

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- These descriptors provide an overview of what oracy skills could look like in action. They are NOT an exhaustive list.
- Levels build upon each other. Higher levels assume that students have already mastered the skills in the previous steps.
- Terms in **BOLD** are defined in the *Glossary of Oracy Terms*.

CONCLUSION

Oracy is a fundamental skill for learners: it deeply influences development, literacy and communication abilities, and it represents a cornerstone in students' growth as learners, as thinkers and also as civic-minded, engaged, and three-dimensional human beings. Thus, the integration of all the relevant components of oracy— cognition, metacognition, linguistics, social and emotional response, and physical behaviour—into the assessment tools of English Language Arts is fundamental. The following excerpt illuminates the importance and even urgency of oracy in the development of 21st century citizens. We must be more explicit in helping young people frame the power of language and speaking with and not at one another if we are to combat some of the most troubling socio-political trends – polarization, radicalization, the assault on truth with the rise in “fake news” – both at home and abroad:

The term *talk* integrates speaking and listening. Talk is the flexible interchange of ideas, feelings and experiences created by the individuals participating in any talk event. It is the creation of verbal and non-verbal language in a social context. Talk includes exploration, questioning, giving of information and the building of relationships. Through talk, ideas are constructed and adapted. Talk is an immediate vehicle for mediation and resolution of conflict. The structures of talk are defined by the speakers' communicative ability to respond meaningfully in the context of a social event or electronic exchange. Talk is one of the most powerful tools in determining and developing individual and collective relationships as well as our social positions in the world.

(Foundation for the Atlantic Canada English Language Arts Curriculum, n.d., p. 12)

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