



ACADEMIC TALK FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

In Support of Equity and
Academic Preparedness

Marion Heron, Sally Baker
and Kieran Balloo

GREAT DEBATES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

ACADEMIC TALK FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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PREFACE

Key to success in higher education is students' preparedness to transition, to engage and to be supported with their studies. Without this, students are likely to fail, pause and even withdraw from their programmes, which creates significant financial, motivational and reputational risk for both students and institutions. Consequently, higher education institutions, academics and policymakers are particularly interested in making sure that 'the first-year experience' is well-supported and well-understood, as well as evidenced by several decades of research on students' transitions into university study.

However, when it comes to ensuring that students are prepared, there is less of a shared and sustained focus on how students are prepared prior to arriving at university. This can be seen in the diversity in terminology about what needs to be demonstrated – captured in terms such as 'preparedness', 'readiness', 'aptitude' and 'capability' – revealing inconsistencies in terms of what counts as student preparedness for higher education. In particular, the languages, literacies and knowledge conventions of academic study are often sites of struggle for students, especially so-called equity or widening participation cohorts who have experienced educational disadvantage.

With planned increases to the numbers of graduates in national workforces internationally to meet future global knowledge economy needs, and the ubiquitous presence of Generative Artificial Intelligence in work and education, the need to develop shared understandings of preparedness is amplified. We argue in this book that the role played by spoken language with supporting academic preparation and learning at university is perhaps the most invisible, as well as being the most necessary. Indeed, as universities react

(slowly) to the impacts of Generative Artificial Intelligence on modes of curricula, teaching and learning, there has been a call for assessment reform that could signal less emphasis on academic writing than we have become accustomed to in higher education.

This book makes a case for the explicit inclusion of academic talk in the curriculum, teaching and assessment in both preparing students for higher education study, and in university classrooms. The book offers theoretical, empirical and practical perspectives on academic talk as an essential part of university preparedness in general, but with a specific focus on the importance of academic talk for equity and widening participation cohorts.

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We dedicate this book to the students who navigate less privileged routes into higher education, and who may experience unfamiliarity and insecurity during their time transitioning into and/or studying at university. We know how important it is for students to feel they can achieve academic success, and we have long advocated for recognising the key role language plays in this journey. In writing this book, we wanted to build on the moments we have experienced with students and colleagues over the years when they realise the role language can play in elevating their academic positioning.

We would like to thank colleagues who have engaged with our ideas for this book and who encouraged us to write down the many musings and conversations about the importance of language – in particular academic talk – in the university experience. We would like to thank the educators who gave their valuable time and insights into the case studies presented in Chapters 5 and 6.

Finally, during the writing of this book, two of us faced and/or experienced redundancy. While this caused a series of painful ripples and meant that two of us worked on this unwaged at times, it was also a reminder of the precarious nature of higher education for academic staff, as well as for students.

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INTRODUCTION

This book brings together several current debates around oracy, dialogic teaching and the role that academic talk can play in both widening access to higher education and creating more equitable learning opportunities. Oracy can be simply defined as ‘the skills¹ involved in using talk to communicate effectively across a range of social contexts’ (Mercer & Dawes, 2014, p. 2), invoking our ‘capacity to use speech to express [our] thoughts and communicate with others, in education and in life’ (Alexander, 2013, p. 10). Focusing on the value of talk in the higher education context is timely, not least because recent higher education reforms – such as the Universities Accord in Australia (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024a) – have renewed a commitment to increasing the percentage of people with undergraduate degrees, meaning growing enrolments from students from under-represented cohorts accessing higher education through ‘non-traditional’ pathways. Optimising such academic preparation pathways for diverse students, who have often had limited or disrupted schooling experiences (Syme et al., 2022), is key to expanding access and enhancing success of all students (Baker et al., 2022; Baker & Irwin, 2016). Evidence generated about the

¹We note the limitations of invoking the skills discourse when talking about the dynamic use of language for meaning-making (see Chapter 2).

academic and sociocultural benefits of embedding oracy in primary schooling contexts (Mercer & Dawes, 2014; Mercer et al., 2017; Millard & Menzies, 2016) suggests that similar positive outcomes could also be seen for those transitioning into higher education.

The fundamental premise of the book is that there is a rich and generative relationship between academic talk, equity and academic preparedness for higher education studies. Until now, there has been a siloed approach to exploring oracy, dialogic pedagogy and academic literacies, and few initiatives have addressed oracy or dialogic teaching in the higher education context. However, each area has the same educational goal to provide all students with the knowledge, practices and confidence to be able to successfully study in higher education. By purposefully using academic talk in university classroom settings, we will posit that this can support students to better engage, argue and connect with their learning, peers and educators. Working with research conducted by the authors focused on ‘alternative pathway’ teaching contexts, this book draws on a range of perspectives and experiences of academic preparedness to conceptualise the need for more explicit use of academic talk. In this opening chapter, we will set out the rationale for the three fields of work to be brought together in the book.

We also make the case that academic preparation pathway contexts, such as Enabling Education and Foundation Year programmes, are ideal sites for inculcating and cultivating the use of academic talk in ways that help to develop students’ academic literacies more broadly, setting them up for success. We highlight how these programmes disproportionately enrol students from widening participation (henceforth, ‘WP’) backgrounds (Jackson et al., 2023), which brings the argument back to equitable education opportunities and engagement.

Firstly, we discuss the importance of paying more attention to language in higher education, making a case for our focus on talk. That is, giving speaking and listening more attention. Secondly, we examine the context of equity and WP in higher education systems globally, exploring the policy settings and political imperatives for equitable access to, inclusion in and success with university study. Thirdly, we will outline what academic preparedness for higher education means, especially in the context of WP, and explore how

this is taught in academic preparation pathway programmes. Finally, we will make the case for the value of academic talk when it comes to academic preparedness and engagement in higher education, particularly in the context of educational disadvantage. We will then provide an overview of the structure of the book.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

As the building block of communication, language is the foundation stone of learning, regardless of environment, discipline or context. However, despite its centrality, the fundamental role of language in opening, mediating, facilitating, determining, obscuring and restricting learning and teaching is often overlooked in higher education, and especially in monolingual and Anglophone contexts. As this book will argue, this is to the detriment of everyone involved in the project of education: teachers, learners, managers, community members, employers, societies and economies. Although it may now be a cliché, this ignorance of the importance of language (noticing it, teaching it, learning it and valuing it) is reminiscent of David Foster Wallace's famous 2005 speech, *This is Water* (Wallace, 2009), where he starts with the parable of an older fish asking two younger fish who are swimming the other way, 'Morning, boys. How's the water?', and the younger fish replying, 'What the hell is water?' While Wallace was writing metaphorically about developing awareness (and not squandering through ignorance) in life and existence, the same analogy can be applied to language in education. If we fail to pay close attention to how language shapes learning and teaching, we are slipping into the same lack of awareness as the younger fish in Wallace's parable.

This is not to say that language is invisible in higher education. Language is a tacit resource and a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991) for those who are proficient in the 'right kinds' of language. Conversely, language becomes hyper-visible when it is found to be deficient, incomprehensible, or just plain 'wrong' (Preece, 2015; Turner, 2011). The latter example has fuelled a

whole ‘cottage industry’ (Mitchell, 2010) of ‘academic skills’ departments and staff in universities, which often invoke remedial or medicalised ‘fix it’ approaches (Turner, 2011), inadvertently pathologising students. Although the scholarly literature has critiqued generic, skills-based approaches (Lea & Street, 1998; Wingate, 2006), the practice of embedding language into curriculum and teaching remains a perennial challenge.

For students who are learning in languages other than their first language – English in our cases – the focus on language becomes sharper and more punitive, with the policing of language proficiency (for entry to a programme of higher education) forming part of a high-stakes, high-profit surveillance system (Murray, 2016). The treatment of language proficiency for international LBOTE students highlights three problematic confluences. Firstly, when language proficiency is connected to migration regimes, meaning state actors are able to legislate and monitor English language proficiency, this creates a highly pressurised environment for students to need to ‘perform’ their language (Turner, 2011). Relatedly, when language proficiency is given such prestige in educational (and other) migration regimes, the demand for certificates of such proficiency creates a significant commercial market, which drives up the costs of education for international LBOTE students. Secondly, when language proficiency is treated as a proxy for academic readiness, this oversimplifies the complex relationship between language and aptitude for learning (Murray, 2016). Thirdly, the focus on meeting language proficiency requirements solely for a student’s entry to a university programme means that there is limited (if any) imperative to focus on language development throughout their studies (Murray, 2016). This limited view – that students arrive with sufficient language to proceed and thus limited ongoing support needs to be offered – stymies the linguistic development of all students.

Language is clearest (and with the highest stakes) in the case of assessment, which generally rests on a ‘performance’ of learning, primarily demonstrated through the written mode (essays, reports, reflections, annotated bibliographies), or through formal oral presentations. Such a product-focused understanding of language and literacy is a dominant frame in higher education, coupled with

limited support given to students to draft versions and receive feedback, as per a process approach (Heron, 2019). As such, university students get limited support before they submit work for appraisal. This is under the stressful condition of assessment determining their overall grade – currency for the postgraduate employment market. And while there are supports (through academic lecturers, tutors and ‘Academic Skills’ units – those cottage industries that Sally Mitchell wrote of back in 2010), these are not always built on relational models, where time and the system permit trust to be built between a student and a support. Instead, as part of the neoliberal ideologies that permeate higher education governance, universities have strived to make efficiency cuts that include relying more frequently on outsourced supports from external providers (such as third-party platforms like Studiosity, Grammarly and Turnitin).

Despite these critiques of how language can be used to create problems and police students, it is, of course, imperative that students have sufficient linguistic competence to learn and manage their studies, including being able to identify, seek and utilise help when needed. The current approaches to language described above – remedial support, surveillance, policing – are a poor set of options that come from ignorance of what language is, what role it plays and its fundamental value to everything we do in higher education.

The Importance of Talk in Teaching and Learning

What is talk? As with any complex and multifaceted phenomenon, talk goes by many names: speaking and listening, conversation, speech, discussion, dialogue, debate, discourse, pitch, presentation. . . While these align in many ways with the purpose or genre of the language activity, the underlying thread is the use of oral, verbal and aural modes of semiotics and meaning-making. We talk all the time and in many different contexts, so much like Wallace’s fish in water parable (Wallace, 2009), the value of talk in the classroom is often concealed by its omnipresence. This means it becomes a taken-for-granted backdrop to teaching and learning,

which, of course, creates a missed opportunity to leverage the incredible possibilities of more purposeful use of talk to create equitable and highly impactful opportunities for students (and educators).

The subordination of talk to writing is captured in work that explores the concept of ‘oracy’, which was a term advanced by Wilkinson (1965) to provide an equivalent term to ‘literacy’, seeking to elevate the value of talk to the levels of attention that reading and writing attracted (and still attract; see Chapter 3 for a fuller discussion). Despite Wilkinson’s efforts, oracy has long remained a relatively elusive concept and component of education: it is rarely factored into curricula, and it is not a well-developed component of Initial Teacher Education. However, over the last decade, there have been several attempts to amplify oracy and the importance of talk in school teaching contexts in the United Kingdom thanks to Neil Mercer’s work at Cambridge University,² the work of charity Voice 21,³ and an All-Party Parliamentary working group (Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG), 2023). When we started writing this book in 2024, the Labour Party had just formed a government in the United Kingdom; they ran on a campaign that included a pitch for a national curriculum for oracy (Newall et al., 2024). In the media reporting that followed Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer’s announcement about oracy, one commentator inadvertently identified why it had taken so long for oracy to gain prominence, writing that the ‘only thing wrong with this is the made-up word “oracy” ... [is that it] has a nasty whiff of the dentist’s chair’ (Kellaway, 2023).

Despite the slow uptake of oracy, there is a small but established field of work that has explored classroom talk in primary classroom settings (Mercer & Dawes, 2014; Mercer et al., 2017; Millard & Menzies, 2016) and dialogic teaching in school contexts (Alexander, 2017, 2020). This work has highlighted the ways that teachers and students can leverage the power of talk for developing problem-solving, argumentation and creating collaborative classrooms. As we will discuss in more detail in Chapter 3, there is also

²<https://oracycambridge.org/>

³<https://voice21.org>

a strong line of argument about how focussing on talk can create more equitable engagement in education (Millard & Menzies, 2016) and respond to the educational challenges that COVID-19 (henceforth, COVID) created. However, there is little that has addressed oracy in higher education settings (albeit see Balloo et al., 2025; Heron, 2019; Heron, Baker, et al., 2023; Heron & Dippold, 2019). Likewise, while there is an established line of work in the United Kingdom, there is little that has addressed this in other national contexts, such as Australia.

WHY IS ASSESSMENT DRIVING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT ACADEMIC TALK?

Written assessment is the dominant approach to evaluating student learning in higher education. The essay, in particular, is a conventional and ubiquitous form of written assessment (Timperley & Schick, 2025), once even referred to as the ‘default genre’ (Womack, 1993). However, since generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) can produce text that could plausibly have been produced by humans (Yusuf et al., 2024), and in some cases even be considered to be of higher quality (Li et al., 2023), this calls into question whether written assessment will, or even *can*, continue to dominate the assessment landscape going forward. That is, if a given course’s learning outcomes require students to demonstrate understanding without the aid of artificial intelligence (AI), assessment of learning based on unsupervised written assessments becomes a threat to assessment validity (Corbin et al., 2025; Dawson et al., 2024). Instead, there are new arguments that assessing synchronously produced talk over asynchronously produced writing is a necessary shift. Two recent framings around assessment design in the age of AI are relevant to discussions about academic talk.

The first framing is what Corbin et al. (2025) refer to as discursive versus structural approaches to assessment design. Essentially, a discursive approach simply means that students are instructed not to use GenAI tools beyond what is permitted, which often in practice means they cannot use the tools for actual writing.

However, the authors critique this approach, noting that enforceability is not possible. As an alternative, Corbin et al. make a strong call for structural changes to assessment design to ‘directly alter the nature, format, or mechanics of how a task must be completed, such that the success of these changes is not reliant on the student’s understanding, interpretation, or compliance with instructions’ (Corbin et al., 2025, pp. 6–7). Some of the ways they propose that structural changes can be made to assessment include interactive oral assessment and live discussions where students can demonstrate their thinking and ideas about the topic. Thus, this signals a shift towards oral, over written, assessments in higher education.

The two-lane approach to assessment is another framing proposed as a way to maintain assessment security in the age of GenAI (Liu & Bridgeman, 2023b), and this is also relevant to discussions about academic talk. Lane 1 assessments should assure learning (i.e. assessment of learning) by being secure. Other assessments lie in lane 2 and involve or allow for AI-human collaboration (i.e. assessment for learning). It is notable that many of the forms of Lane 1 assessments of learning being proposed appear to involve some form of academic talk, with examples including in-person interactive oral assessments, viva voces, contemporaneous in-class assessments and skill development (Liu & Bridgeman, 2023b).

It is worth noting that scholarly work has thus far avoided prescribing particular assessment types, since no one type of assessment will be secure and/or assure learning across all contexts. As Corbin et al. (2025) emphasise, ‘validity means that an assessment represents the capacity of the student to do or know something. But what that “something” is changes not only from subject to subject but even from assessment to assessment within subjects’ (Corbin et al., 2025, p. 9). Therefore, it is entirely feasible that oral assessments will be just one of many creative approaches to assessment design utilised in the coming years. While Liu and Bridgeman (2023a) do not recommend that educators simply try to avoid students using AI altogether, they do note that ‘[a]voiding it includes reverting to oral or otherwise invigilated exams.’ Thus, it