

## Comparative analysis of the approach to first language oracy of Polish and Portuguese early education teachers

### Análise comparativa da abordagem da oracia da língua materna de professores da educação básica polacos e portugueses

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**Abstract:** Oracy, crucial for individuals to communicate, think, and learn, can be developed through schooling. Our study aimed to compare Polish and Portuguese teachers' perceptions of oracy. Based on a literature review, a self-report survey was developed for the study. It comprised questions about: 1. the demographic information, 2. the practices in the classrooms, 3. teachers' views and attitudes about oracy. 253 (62.00%) Portuguese and 157 (38.00%) Polish elementary school teachers participated. Our main results indicate that Polish and Portuguese teachers declared that they valued oracy, and devoted time during their lessons to promote and support its development in their students. However, the Portuguese teachers, as compared with the Polish teachers, focused more on discussions and debates among students, and allowed them more autonomy in their classrooms. They also appreciated more the importance of oracy for human development, including reasoning and literacy learning.

**Keywords:** Oracy; Mandatory Education; Polish; Portuguese; Teachers.

**Resumo:** A Oracia é crucial para os indivíduos comunicarem, pensarem e aprenderem, e deve ser desenvolvida ao longo da escolaridade. O objetivo do nosso estudo é comparar as concepções de professores polacos e portugueses quanto à Oracia. Com base na revisão bibliográfica, foi desenvolvido um questionário. As questões repartem-se em: 1. Informação Demográfica; 2. Práticas na sala de aula. 3. Perspetivas e atitudes dos professores acerca da Oracia. Participaram no estudo 253 (62.00%) professores portugueses e 157 (38.00%) professores polacos. Os resultados indicam que tanto os professores polacos como portugueses valorizam a oracia e dedicam tempo, nas aulas, ao seu desenvolvimento junto dos alunos. Contudo, quando comparados aos professores polacos, os professores portugueses, valorizaram mais a discussão e o debate entre estudantes, dando-lhes maior autonomia nas suas aulas, parecendo valorizar mais o papel da oracia no desenvolvimento, incluindo o raciocínio e a aprendizagem da literacia.

**Palavras-chave:** Oracia; Educação Básica; Polónia; Portugal; Professores.

## Introduction

Language is a powerful tool to support and enhance children's cognitive development (Nelson, 1996). Language skills consist, in the broadest sense, of literacy and oracy skills, both central in education, as they build community and serve as tools for teaching, learning, and thought construction. Our research aimed to examine if early education teachers value oracy for its role in the child's development.

As children acquire spoken language from birth by immersion through interaction with others in everyday contexts, it is sometimes incorrectly assumed that they have already acquired this competence before entering systematic education (Kaldalh et al., 2019). Language acquisition occurs, however, in at least three environments: family, peer group, and school (Niesporek-Szamburska, 2010). Moreover, as testing culture dominates today, literacy might be considered a more measurable concept

than oracy. That way of thinking might be reflected in the Polish national curriculum which does not list oracy as a separate subject or category (in fact, no Polish term for oracy even exists) (Daszkiewicz et al., 2020). On the contrary, in Portugal, oracy (oralidade) constitutes one of the four main subfields of the Portuguese Mother Tongue subject, alongside Reading-Writing, Literary Education, and Grammar. The competence goals to be achieved by the end of basic education include key aspects of talk and conversation (comprehension and production). Text comprehension is defined as the ability to identify the main idea and implicit information when discussing all major topics included in the curriculum: Maths, Social Studies, Science, and Arts. For instance, the syllabus of Social Studies for Year 1 students recommends that the teachers promote strategies that develop the students' critical and analytical thinking, focusing on: organising class discussions of, among other matters, aspects of the citizenship; organising debates that require the formulation of opinions; explaining arguments that support opinions; identifying and assessing the plausibility of arguments that support opinions. The 1986 reform of education highlighted the role of education in the construction of participation and democracy, and the syllabus of Portuguese Language of 1991 presents as a main objective the use of language as a learning tool and a tool for planning activities (discussions, debates, readings, note taking, summaries, schemata). Therefore, since the official educational documents in the aforementioned two countries differ in their focus on oracy, we wanted to compare its perceptions of Polish and Portuguese teachers. We think that Poland and Portugal may serve as examples of two educational systems in which the role of oracy is not and is, respectively, explicitly mentioned and discussed in the national curricula.

Borg (2003) describes teachers as “active thinking decision-makers” having a pivotal role on curricular reforms. The teachers' educational actions, for example, the choice of instruction approaches, informed by teaching experience, subject knowledge, motivation, and beliefs constitute the most important factor in building students' academic success and their well-being, when the actual student-related variables are controlled for (Hattie, 2009). Since the quality of oracy in the classroom relates to students' achievements in their native language, mathematics, and science (Alexander, 2012), we were interested in the perception of oracy by early childhood education teachers.

To sum up, our study primarily investigated the perceived value of oracy for learning and thinking as self-reported by early education teachers from Portugal and Poland. This cross-cultural comparison of a selected aspect of educational systems and pedagogical practices aims to serve as a foundation for future studies that will examine more deeply how teacher education and official curriculum impact the actual pedagogical practices of teachers in particular contexts, especially intercultural. Specifically, through survey responses we wanted to examine what differences, if any, would occur in the self-reported beliefs and practices of Portuguese and Polish teachers regarding the importance of oracy in teaching and learning.

### ***Definition of oracy***

The term oracy was created by Wilkinson (1965) to emphasise its equal status to literacy (Jones, 2017). It consists of speaking and listening skills (Hewitt & Inghilleri, 1993; Graham et al., 2016),

crucial for thinking and learning (Alexander, 2012). Oracy is a twofold concept: an ability to express oneself clearly and purposefully, communicate with and adjust to others effectively and a tool to enhance learning through questioning, seeking, sharing, and constructing knowledge.

Communicative skills are crucial to build a community (Culioli, 1990); thus, to construct democracy and citizenship (Kaldahl, Bachinger & Rijlaarsdam, 2019; Niza, 1996), to communicate one's voice and respect the others' voices in order to live together and embrace diversity. They allow us to collaborate and productively think together to create new knowledge (Littleton & Mercer, 2013). Nystrand (1997) highlights the function of classroom talk as an interpretation and a collaborative co-construction of knowledge, i. e., as a continuum of relative perspectives of competing voices.

According to Barnes (2008, 2010), the classroom talk has two functions: exploratory and presentational. Exploratory talk, a hesitant talk concerned with a speaker's thoughts, examines new ideas and what other people do with them. Presentational talk refers to either a teacher's assessment of the students' understanding of the previously taught content or a child's speech to an unfamiliar audience. The interaction patterns in the classroom should encourage children to express themselves and their reasoning, to justify and discuss their opinions, construct their knowledge, and enhance shared understanding and learning (Rojas-Drummond et al., 2001).

### ***The role of oracy in academic skills***

Collaboration, critical thinking, and understanding each other's perspectives are key concepts to a transformative education (OCDE, 2018). Arguably, the most important contribution for the conceptualisation of oracy as a learning tool comes from Vygotsky (1984), for whom knowledge is first interpersonal, and then intrapersonal. In his perspective, talk as a language activity is central to thinking, sharing, and co-constructing knowledge in a collaborative way. According to Mercer (2002), the primary aim of education should be to help the children use language as a tool to learn and think collectively. The dialogic process should involve deep inquiry, engagement, and the awareness of the learning process, because oracy includes different, culturally-learned domains, like: Physical (e.g. voice quality, eye contact, posture), Linguistic (e.g. register, grammar, intersubjective perspective, text organisation), Cognitive (reasoning, self-regulation, audience) and Social-emotional (e.g. working with others, listening and responding appropriately) ones (Mercer et al., 2017). These domains influence everyday life and the students' school achievement and future lives.

Exploratory talk between teachers and students, and between students, can enable children to deeply engage themselves in exploring the world and the ideas around them (Teberosky et al., 2020), through relating what they know and sharing new ideas emerging from this hesitant talk, which deepens their understanding. According to Nystrand (1997, p. 29) The bottom line for instruction is that the quality of student learning is closely linked to the quality of classroom talk. Questioning, reasoning, idea sharing, and answering should be used as a tool to construct knowledge (Sousa & Costa-Pereira, 2021). Alexander (2012) lists six functions of classroom talk: think-

ing, learning, communicating, democratic engagement, teaching, and assessing. Jay et al. (2017) reported that dialogic teaching benefits engagement in the classroom and content knowledge of English, Maths, and Science. Moreover, the role of talk in the transfer of reasoning skills across subject areas was observed. Costa-Pereira e Sousa (2018) showed in an intervention study that questioning enhances content knowledge and reading and writing processes as well as engagement toward learning processes in primary education.

Other studies demonstrated that oracy development leads to personal and social benefits including attitudes towards learning, enhanced self-esteem and self-confidence (Mercer et al., 2017; Fuertes et al., 2018), and reduces anxiety (Hanley et al., 2015). Portuguese pedagogical thought emphasises oracy and the pupils' voice. Oracy can develop civic engagement and empowerment, increasing the children's ability to listen to others, debate issues, and participate in a society (Pacheco, 2008; Trindade & Cosme, 2010), understand social issues, manage personal perspectives, and resolve differences with others (Nagda & Gurin, 2007). Talk is based on a planned negotiation, cooperation, and sharing, aiming for the appropriation of knowledge, processes, and moral and aesthetic values (Niza, 1996). Kosińska (2016) examined detailed educational requirements related to democratic values listed in the Polish curriculum. Even though during the first educational stage, children are expected to take responsibility for their actions and participation in different groups, respect the value and rights of other people, the curriculum as such does not aim to systematically develop the students' attitudes related to democratic values during all educational stages. Generally, the focus is on developing knowledge, not promoting certain attitudes. None of the requirements refers to dialogic talk.

### ***Cultural differences and adaptation to varied environments***

According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979, 1995), processes and life contexts mutually affect human development, and each person reciprocally influences both of them. Transactional models of development emphasise the significance of bidirectional, interactional processes and present individual development as an adaptation to the environment, thereby shaped by cultural, social, family, educational, and biological influences, and resulting in dialectic integration (Sameroff & Fiese, 2000; Sameroff, 2010). Crittenden and Clausen (2000) suggested that the Mediterranean or Ports cultures developed excellent oral competencies and social engagement skills due to their historic engagement in goods trade. Due to geographic and weather conditions, in the Fertile Crescent individuals relied on their personal ability to interact and communicate to promote their products, learn new techniques and inventions. In the European North, survival was more likely in a group, or when one used a social strategy. This led to individuality and oral communication losing their significance. Thus, one may expect differences in the level of importance (also in schools) and skill of oracy in different countries. In fact, we found such a difference in Portuguese and Polish national curricula (Daszkiewicz, et al., 2020). This is why, beyond the official documents, we decided to compare the perspectives of early childhood education teachers' working in southern-located – Portugal and northern-located – Poland to explore more potential differences.

## The present study

In this study, we aimed to present the teachers' perspectives and to provide insights from the comparative analysis of Portuguese and Polish teachers' answers in a self-report questionnaire. Teachers' beliefs and attitudes were also examined in the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) (OECD, 2009), including data from Portugal and Poland. This study, however, concerned lower secondary education, and did not mention oracy. To our knowledge, thus, our study is the first one to compare teachers' attitudes to oracy between countries. We think that the results of our analyses could lead to changes in educational policies, should differences between countries emerge. Thus, we examined the following research questions:

RQ1. Do early childhood education teachers' value oracy for its role in the child's development, learning, and academic future, and recognise its fundamental contribution to literacy skills?

RQ2: Are Polish and Portuguese teachers' perceptions of oracy different? Differences between countries might be expected based on earlier internationally-collected data (OECD, 2009).

## Materials and methods

### *Measure*

A self-report survey was developed for the study. The questionnaire comprised questions about: 1. the respondents and their pupils' demographic information, 2. practices in the classrooms, 3. teachers' views and attitudes about oracy. The questions were based on an extensive literature review (Alexander, 2012; Barnes, 2008; Bignell, 2012; Haworth, 2001; Hewitt & Inghilleri, 1993; Jones, 2010; Lan Yong, 2010; Mercer, 2002; Nystrand, 2003; Riley, 2006). We explored the theoretical constructs presented in sections 1.1. and 1.2. The original version of the questionnaire was written in English, and then translated into Portuguese and Polish by Portuguese and Polish research teams, respectively. The wording of each item controversial to translate was discussed by the entire team to ensure that all items corresponded with one another and that both versions measured exactly the same concepts. The participants' responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, where the digits corresponded to: 1. I definitely do not agree; 2. I do not agree; 3. It is difficult to say; 4. I agree; 5. I definitely agree. The items in the questionnaire concerned: 1. The percentage of time devoted by the respondents to different teaching methods/practices (data not analysed in the present paper; (the number of items: 14)); 2. The usage of exercises supporting the language and communication skills of students; the results and the items (the number of items: 13) are presented in Table 1; 3. The participants' opinions about how the quality of oracy in the classroom influences the development of students' skills; the results and the items are presented in Table 2 (the number of items: 7); 4. The participants' opinions about how the students' oracy skills influence the development of students' other cognitive and linguistic skills; the results and the items are presented in Table 3 (the number of items: 9); 5. The participants' opinions about oracy (application and importance) in the classroom; the results and the items (the number of



items: 20) are presented in Table 4. The items in the questionnaire are presented in tables 1, 2, 3, & 4. We did not pilot our survey, as we wanted to include a possibly wide array of statements referring to instructional practices and the relationship between oracy, learning, and thinking. Since most of the statements described common teaching strategies, we had expected that the results would be skewed to the left, which was indeed the case (for details, please see sections results and limitations).

## **Participants**

253 (62%) Portuguese and 157 (38%) Polish elementary education teachers participated in the study. All teachers had experience in work with children in elementary education, defined as a Reception Year and Year 1, Year 2, and Year 3. In some cases, the teachers also worked with older children.

The entry age for Portugal is 6, and compulsory education lasts for 12 years (9 years of elementary plus 3 of secondary school) (Ministério da Educação e Ciência, 2012).

The entry age for Poland is 7 (understood as the year in which the child turns 7); however, the child must attend an obligatory Reception Year prior to entering school (Minister of National Education and Sport, 2016). Upon parental request, it may be lowered to 6 (The Reception Year must still be completed either in the kindergarten or at school). In 2017, Poland went through an education reform. Before that year the entry age was 6 for school, and 5 for the Reception Year. In addition, the stages of education had been changed. Currently, primary education comprises 8 years, instead of 6 plus 3 (primary plus lower secondary school).

248 (97%) Portuguese teachers worked in a state school, while 7 (3%) in a private one. 111 (71%) Polish teachers worked in a state school, while 46 (29%) in a private one. As only 38 (15%) Portuguese teachers and 9 (6%) Polish teachers taught English as a Foreign Language, we decided not to calculate separate statistics for these groups. Within the Portuguese group, 164 (65%) teachers had a Bachelor degree, 53 (21%) – a Master degree, and 36 (14%) – a postgraduate degree. Within the Polish group, 22 (14%) teachers had a Bachelor degree, 100 (64%) – a Master degree, and 35 (22%) – a postgraduate degree. This discrepancy reflects the actual structure of teachers' qualifications in both countries. In Portugal, teachers used to work when having a Bachelor degree, and typically earned a Master degree only when approaching the height of their professional career. Currently, younger teachers start working after having already earned their Master' degree. This shift is due to a change in Portuguese teacher's training, as a 5 year Bachelor course has been replaced with a 3 (Bachelor) plus 2 (Master) year course. In Poland, teachers typically begin their professional careers after completing a 3 (Bachelor) plus 2 (Master) year course. This difference is confirmed by the fact that Portuguese teachers ( $M = 46.28$ ,  $SD = 7.67$ ) were older than Polish teachers ( $M = 36.85$ ,  $SD = 9.28$ ,  $t(283.20) = 10.63$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ). We decided to include all the respondents' scores in the final sample, as these differences in education and age reflect the actual situation in Portuguese and Polish educational system. What is more, initial regression analyses indicated that both educational degree and age of the respondents had little to no impact on the examined issues.

All teachers expressed informed consent to participate in the study. Formal approval from an independent ethics committee was not required for this study in accordance with the national legislation and the

institutional requirements. The work described was carried out in accordance with the Code of Ethics of the World Medical Association (Declaration of Helsinki) for studies involving humans using data collection.

## **Procedure**

An online questionnaire was e-mailed to the participants. The survey data were collected electronically. The questionnaire started with an explanation of what oracy is (as understood by the authors of the paper and following literature), to make sure that all the respondents understood the concept in question in the same way. This was especially important as our previous study of the legislation concerning oracy in early childhood education in Poland and Portugal demonstrated that the term: oracy is practically unknown in Poland, and largely absent from legislation, while in Portugal, it plays a prominent role (Daszkiewicz, et al., 2020).

## **Results**

Generally, for the majority of questions the medians equalled 4.00 or 5.00 (with the maximum score being 5.00, showing a definite agreement with a given statement), and/or the scores distribution was not normal, but left-skewed (Maximum skewness coefficients in the Portuguese group equalled -2.322, and in the Polish group equalled -1.660; Shapiro-Wilks significance coefficient  $p \leq .001$  for all items in both groups). However, the differences between the Polish and the Portuguese teachers were still observable. The Mann-Whitney test for independent samples (Table 1) showed that Polish and Portuguese teachers differed in the occurrence of activities supporting oracy that they reported to have used. Portuguese teachers, as compared with Polish teachers, declared that they used more frequently the following educational activities: dialoguing with a particular educational goal, collaborative talk, and debates. Polish teachers, as compared with Portuguese teachers, declared that they more frequently used the following educational activities: talking about students' life and asking open questions. The teachers did not differ in their reports of how often they used other listed activities.

Portuguese teachers, as compared with Polish teachers, believed more strongly that the quality of oracy in the classroom influences their students' skills (Table 2): achieved test scores, critical thinking, learning, problem solving, active citizenship, and reading comprehension. The teachers did not differ in their declared assessment of the relationship between classroom oracy and communication.

Portuguese teachers, as compared with Polish teachers, believed more strongly that oracy skills influence their students' other skills (Table 3): reasoning, arguing, oral narrative. Polish teachers, as compared with Portuguese teachers, believed more strongly that oracy skills influence their students' justification skills, i. e., students communicating what they have learned.

Portuguese teachers, as compared with Polish teachers, agreed more strongly with the following statements (Table 4): Students should have a say in what the classroom education looks like, Speaking and active listening skills must be a central element in the curriculum, Literacy skills are important to develop oracy skills, Effective oral communication skills are fundamental to human development, I



**Table 1.** Exercises supporting the development of linguistic and communicative skills of students used by early education teachers (self-report).

	Poland			Portugal			
Items	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Teacher-led discussions	4.00	3.56	0.95	4.00	3.69	0.78	$U = 18477.50, Z = 0.99, p = .324, r = .05$
Student-led discussions	3.00	.98	0.96	3.00	3.04	1.03	$U = 19054.50, Z = 0.59, p = .558, r = .03$
Dialoguing with a particular educational goal	4.00	3.63	0.82	4.00	3.85	0.85	$U = 16551.00, Z = 2.78, p = .005^{**}, r = .14$
Role-play	3.00	3.38	0.84	3.00	3.29	0.95	$U = 18896.50, Z = 0.74, p = .461, r = .04$
Storytelling	4.00	3.77	0.63	4.00	3.69	0.86	$U = 19194.00, Z = 0.49, p = .625, r = .02$
Talking about the students' life	4.00	3.57	0.83	3.00	3.33	0.98	$U = 17261.50, Z = 2.36, p = .018^{*}, r = .12$
Talking about the students' interests, hobbies	4.00	3.74	0.78	4.00	3.60	0.90	$U = 18126.50, Z = 1.40, p = .162, r = .07$
Talking about the books that students read, films they saw (outside of the reading list)	4.00	3.45	1.00	4.00	3.44	0.97	$U = 19356.50, Z = 0.32, p = .751, r = .02$
Common projects	3.00	3.34	0.94	3.00	3.20	1.05	$U = 18068.00, Z = 1.27, p = .203, r = .06$
Oracy games	4.00	3.50	0.92	4.00	3.47	1.07	$U = 19797.50, Z = 0.06, p = .955, r = .00$
Asking open questions	4.00	3.81	0.79	4.00	3.62	0.90	$U = 17322.00, Z = 2.08, p = .038^{*}, r = .10$
Collaborative talk	4.00	3.61	0.81	4.00	3.78	0.86	$U = 17539.50, Z = 2.01, p = .045^{*}, r = .10$
Debates	3.00	2.69	1.16	3.00	3.30	1.09	$U = 14073.00, Z = 4.96, p \leq .001^{**}, r = .24$

\*\* =  $p \leq .01$ ; \* =  $p \leq .05$ ;

Source: Study

pay attention to the register of my students' oral statements, Oracy skills are important to develop literacy skills, Oracy skills are important to do well in the university education, Children should practice different registers, e.g. scientific, conversational, etc, Teachers and students should express themselves based on/ construct over the other's contributions, Teachers should lead the classroom talk with a spe-

**Table 2.** The quality of oracy in the classroom influences the following students' skills - early education teachers' opinions.

	Poland			Portugal			
Skills	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Test scores	4.00	3.97	0.80	4.00	4.18	0.77	$U = 16698.00, Z = 2.75, p = .006^{**}, r = .14$
Critical thinking	4.00	3.88	0.76	4.00	4.32	0.76	$U = 13336.50, Z = 5.94, p \leq .001^{**}, r = .29$
Learning	4.00	3.94	0.73	5.00	4.39	0.67	$U = 12981.00, Z = 6.40, p \leq .001^{**}, r = .32$
Problem solving	4.00	4.03	0.71	4.00	4.21	0.78	$U = 16651.50, Z = 2.85, p = .004^{**}, r = .14$
Communication	4.00	4.38	0.69	5.00	4.45	0.70	$U = 18164.00, Z = 1.30, p = .192, r = .06$
Active citizenship	4.00	3.86	0.83	4.00	4.24	0.78	$U = 14543.00, Z = 4.80, p \leq .001^{**}, r = .24$
Reading Comprehension	4.00	4.06	0.78	4.00	4.30	0.71	$U = 16110.00, Z = 3.24, p \leq .001^{**}, r = .16$

\*\* =  $p \leq .01$ ;

cific educational goal in mind. Polish teachers, as compared with Portuguese teachers, agreed more strongly with the following statements: I pay attention to the content of my students' oral statements, I systematically devote time to develop students' oracy.

The teachers did not differ in their preference for the following statements: If I can choose a coursebook, I choose a coursebook that includes exercises on oracy, Teacher-student exchange should follow the mode: initiation (a teacher's question) – response (a student's answer) – evaluation (a teacher's feedback: correct/incorrect), I pay attention to the structure of my students' oral statements, Active listening and speaking skills are important for professional work, Teachers should ask students' to rephrase/summarise what was said previously, The teacher and all students should communicate with one another, Teachers and students should listen to each other, share their ideas, Students should voice and explain their ideas freely/without being afraid to be criticised. No other differences were found.

## Discussion

We found that, generally, both Polish and Portuguese teachers declared that they valued oracy, and devoted time during their lessons to promote and support its development. This shows

**Table 3.** Oracy skills and their influence on other skills of the students as assessed by early education teachers.

	Poland			Portugal			
Skills	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Explaining	4.00	4.24	0.65	4.00	4.18	0.77	$U = 19141.50, Z = 0.49, p = .623, r = .02$
Hypothesizing	4.00	4.10	0.68	4.00	4.15	0.76	$U = 18770.00, Z = 0.78, p = .435, r = .04$
Evaluation	4.00	4.00	0.80	4.00	4.01	0.79	$U = 19546.50, Z = 0.03, p = .976, r = .00$
Reasoning	4.00	4.10	0.69	4.00	4.24	0.75	$U = 17281.00, Z = 2.21, p = .027^*, r = .11$
Justification	4.00	4.35	0.64	4.00	4.14	0.80	$U = 16938.50, Z = 2.38, p = .017^*, r = .12$
Discussion	4.00	4.29	0.67	4.00	4.31	0.74	$U = 18773.50, Z = 0.63, p = .530, r = .03$
Arguing	4.00	4.35	0.65	5.00	4.49	0.65	$U = 16962.00, Z = 2.38, p = .018^*, r = .12$
Asking questions	4.50	4.45	0.63	5.00	4.40	0.68	$U = 19062.50, Z = 0.43, p = .669, r = .02$
Oral narrative	4.00	4.21	0.66	5.00	4.42	0.67	$U = 15986.50, Z = 3.40, p \leq .001^{**}, r = .17$

\*\* =  $p \leq .01$ ; \* =  $p \leq .05$ ;

that they were aware that oral competences should be systematically developed through schooling (cf. Kaldal et al., 2019; Niesporek-Szamburska, 2010). Such awareness is crucial considering the importance of teachers' subject knowledge, beliefs, and experience for their students' academic results (Bahr & Mellor, 2016; Hattie, 2009). Interestingly, Polish teachers appreciated the importance of including children's speaking and listening skills in their instruction even though the term oracy is absent from Polish legislation, and not focused on (cf. Daszkiewicz, et al., 2020). OECD's study (2009) found that both Polish and Portuguese lower secondary education teachers endorsed direct transmission and constructivist approaches to instruction on a similar level, with a moderate preference for the constructivist method. This confirms a common background when it comes to the beliefs about the nature of teaching and learning in Poland and Portugal. However, in our study, the differences in the declared approaches to oracy between the Polish and the Portuguese teachers were still clear.

**Table 4.** Early education teachers' opinions about oracy in the classroom.

	Poland			Portugal			
Items	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
If I can choose a coursebook, I choose a coursebook that includes exercised on oracy	4.00	3.80	0.93	4.00	3.79	0.89	$U = 19354.00, Z = 0.25, p = .804, r = .01$
Students should have a say in what the classroom education looks like	3.00	3.29	0.92	4.00	3.61	0.96	$U = 16046.50, Z = 3.26, p \leq .001^{**}, r = .16$
Teacher-student exchange should follow the mode: initiation (a teacher's question) – response (a student's answer) – evaluation (a teacher's feedback: correct/incorrect)	3.00	2.97	1.21	3.00	2.96	1.04	$U = 19544.50, Z = 0.07, p = .943, r = .00$
Speaking and active listening skills must be a central element in the curriculum	4.00	4.09	0.73	5.00	4.39	0.73	$U = 14885.50, Z = 4.51, p \leq .001^{**}, r = .22$
Literacy skills are important to develop oracy skills	4.00	4.32	0.63	5.00	4.46	0.73	$U = 16966.00, Z = 2.71, p = .007^{**}, r = .13$
Effective oral communication skills are fundamental to human development	4.00	4.34	0.61	5.00	4.50	0.71	$U = 16314.50, Z = 3.29, p \leq .001^{**}, r = .16$
I pay attention to the register of my students' oral statements	4.00	4.17	0.77	5.00	4.37	0.79	$U = 16198.00, Z = 3.19, p \leq .001^{**}, r = .16$
I pay attention to the structure of my students' oral statements	4.00	4.36	0.65	5.00	4.40	0.74	$U = 18372.00, Z = 1.07, p = .286, r = .05$
I pay attention to the content of my students' oral statements	5.00	4.60	0.56	5.00	4.46	0.70	$U = 17812.00, Z = 1.81, p = .071^a, r = .09$
I systematically devote time to develop students' oracy	4.00	4.20	0.71	4.00	4.05	0.79	$U = 17480.00, Z = 1.83, p = .067^a, r = .09$
Active listening and speaking skills are important for professional work	5.00	4.53	0.55	5.00	4.57	0.68	$U = 18030.50, Z = 1.62, p = .106, r = .08$

**Table 4.** Continuation

	Poland			Portugal			
Items	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Oracy skills are important to develop literacy skills	4.00	4.34	0.68	5.00	4.50	0.71	$U = 16659.50, Z = 2.83, p = .005^{**}, r = .14$
Oracy skills are important to do well in the university education	4.00	4.19	0.75	5.00	4.42	0.74	$U = 15921.00, Z = 3.48, p \leq .001^{**}, r = .17$
Children should practice different registers, (e.g. scientific, conversational)	4.00	4.08	0.71	4.00	4.26	0.72	$U = 16705.50, Z = 2.72, p = .007^{**}, r = .13$
Teachers should ask students' to rephrase/summarize what was said previously	4.00	4.17	0.67	4.00	4.15	0.79	$U = 19588.00, Z = 0.04, p = .972, r = .00$
The teacher and all students should communicate with one another	5.00	4.52	0.57	5.00	4.56	0.69	$U = 18137.50, Z = 1.58, p = .114, r = .08$
Teachers and students should listen to each other, share their ideas	5.00	4.55	0.56	5.00	4.58	0.69	$U = 18281.50, Z = 1.45, p = .146, r = .07$
Students should voice and explain their ideas freely/without being afraid to be criticised	5.00	4.61	0.53	5.00	4.61	0.69	$U = 18495.00, Z = 1.03, p = .302, r = .05$
Teachers and students should express themselves based on/construct over the other's contributions	4.00	3.97	0.89	5.00	4.36	0.80	$U = 14467.50, Z = 4.83, p \leq .001^{**}, r = .24$
Teachers should lead the classroom talk with a specific educational goal in mind	4.00	4.00	0.81	4.00	4.25	0.80	$U = 16056.50, Z = 3.29, p \leq .001^{**}, r = .16$

\*\* =  $p \leq .01$ ; a = tendency level

We found that the Polish and Portuguese teachers differed in the self-reported frequency of exercises supporting oracy that they used. Portuguese teachers, as compared with Polish teachers, declared that they more frequently used: dialoguing with a particular educational goal, collaborative talk, and debates.



Polish teachers, as compared with Portuguese teachers, declared that they more frequently used: talking about student-related topics and asking open questions. Thus, the Portuguese teachers self-reported that they focused more on oracy activities that required group work and could have been (and due to the nature of the tasks expected of students likely had been) conducted without or with limited participation of the teacher. This might have allowed children to use language as a tool to learn and think collectively (Mercer, 2002) in a peer group, and search for knowledge on their own, which is essential for learning success (Costa-Pereira & Sousa, 2018). The Polish teachers, in their own self-evaluation, relied more on activities that depended on teacher-student exchanges. Such exchanges are more likely to happen in a classroom where the presentational talk (Barnes, 2010), when the teacher communicates with only one student, evaluating their knowledge, while the rest of the class is listening, occurs. These could have been similar to the Question-Response-Evaluation (Simich-Dudgeon, 1998) and Initiation-Response-Evaluation (Alexander, 2012) type of classroom talk, in which the teacher is more interested in a student's assessment, not in a student's exploratory talk, arguing or debating. Thus, Portuguese teachers declared that they allowed more communications among students themselves, which, as we think, might resemble more a natural conversation, and are less stressful, as they do not necessarily constitute a *de facto* knowledge assessment tool, and occur between peers, without the presence of an evaluator. However, these conclusions need to be tentative; firstly, because talk can be not academically driven, and secondly, as some students' might not participate actively in the group work at all.

The teachers did not differ in their reports of how often they used: teacher- and student-led discussions, role-playing, storytelling, talking about the students' interests, hobbies, talking about the books that students read, films they saw (outside of the reading list), common projects, and oracy games. This shows that the teachers allowed pupils' voices and were interested in establishing a rapport and bond with their students, which, especially in early childhood education, is conducive to learning. For example, preschool teachers' emotional support is linked to vocabulary knowledge growth in their students (Guo et al., 2010).

In our study, both Portuguese and Polish teachers agreed that the quality of oracy in the classroom influences their students' different skills. However, Portuguese teachers, as compared with Polish teachers, believed more strongly that the quality of oracy in the classroom influences: achieved test scores, critical thinking, learning, problem-solving, active citizenship, and reading comprehension, and that oracy skills influence: reasoning, arguing, and oral narrative skills. The Polish teachers, as compared with the Portuguese teachers, believed more strongly that oracy skills influence their students' justification skills - this was the only thinking (talking to learn), not communication, skill, in which the Polish teachers scored higher. Justification is quite a common activity at school (Garcia-Debanc, 1996), and its role is fairly important in evaluating students' knowledge. To justify is to provide an answer to a question: why are you saying that?, and it occurs mainly when the teacher examines the student's reasons for asserting something. Thus, the focus is on content and the transmission of knowledge. It is different from explaining or arguing, because when justifying, the student is basically reporting their knowledge (not constructing it), while the teacher assumes the evaluator role (Forget, 2015). The teachers did not differ in their self-reported assessment of the conceptual framework of oracy (talk to communicate and talk to learn) of the relationship between classroom oracy and communication. These results clearly show that Polish

teachers generally associate classroom oracy more with only communication skills, unlike Portuguese teachers, who valued more the talk to learn and participation, that is, the relationship between oracy and literacy, reasoning, and social skills, indicated in the literature (cf. Alexander, 2012; Barnes, 2008; Littleton & Mercer, 2012; Nystrand, 1997; Trindade & Cosme, 2010). In Poland, it seems that exploratory talk is not as highly valued as in Portugal. It would be important to educate Polish teachers more about the need for teaching these skills also through oral activities.

We also found that the Portuguese teachers, as compared with Polish teachers, agreed more strongly that speaking and active listening skills must be a central element in the curriculum, as effective oral communication skills are fundamental to human development. They believed more that oracy skills are important to develop literacy skills and to do well in the university education, while, conversely, literacy skills are important to develop oracy skills. Moreover, the Portuguese teachers, as compared with Polish teachers, agreed more with a statement that children should practice different registers and that declared that they pay attention to the register of their students' oral statements. These differences in understanding the importance of oracy might be connected to its treatment in the official documents. The Portuguese documents recognize oral teaching as a way of engagement, social participation, communicating, problem-solving, and learning (cf. Daszkiewicz, et al., 2020). These official guidelines even list particular instruction strategies, e. g. organising debates and discussions (separately for major fields of study: Maths, Social Studies, Science, and Arts) aimed to support the development of children's reasoning skills. Thus, the links between oracy and other cognitive and social skills are clearly outlined and directly explained in separate sections. In the Polish documents, as speaking skills are scattered through different sections of the text, it may be only implicitly inferred by the readership what these links are. Our results, thus, underline the direct influence of educational policy and the content and organisation of the curricula on classroom practice. Certain relationships based on scientific findings should be stated explicitly and directly to inform teachers' attitudes and beliefs, and be applied in practice.

In our study, Portuguese teachers, as compared with Polish teachers, believed more that students should have a say in what the classroom education looks like, that teachers and students should express themselves based on the other's contributions, and that teachers should lead the classroom talk with a specific educational goal in mind. These findings corroborate the Crittenden and Clausen (2000) hypothesis that the Mediterranean cultures support oral skills. Polish teachers, as compared with Portuguese teachers, however, agreed more strongly that they pay attention to the content of their students' oral statements, and that they systematically devote time to develop students' oracy. Paying attention to the content of students' statements falls in line with our previous findings that the Polish teachers declared that they focused more on traditional teacher-student exchange based on knowledge exchange and assessment, at the expense of promoting real-life communication between students. The focus here would be on the evaluation if a student has learnt a particular fact, not if a student can use oracy as a learning tool. It is also not clear if the Polish teachers possibly misunderstand/ underappreciate the concept. These findings once more suggest the need for explicit mention and explanation of oracy in the curriculum, to promote its development at schools. Moreover, it should be ensured that oracy is discussed during university courses that award one a qualification to become a teacher.

## Limitations

A limitation of our study is the usage of a self-report measure. We would like to implement a follow-up study in which we would observe the teachers' behaviours in a classroom, and compare them with their declared beliefs and opinions.

Another limitation of our study is that the informants' responses were strongly skewed to positive statements. We think that this is due to the fact that most questions asked the teachers about their usage of quite common educational practices and instructional methods, and it is unlikely they would fail to use them. However, we believe that the questionnaire was sufficiently discriminatory, since we did observe differences between our groups. Moreover, we accounted for the distribution skewness in our calculations by using nonparametric tests.

## Conclusions

Teachers are active thinking and decision makers and their role is important in the success of educational reforms. We found that the Portuguese teachers, as compared with the Polish teachers, declared that they focused more on discussions and debates among students, and allowed them more autonomy in their classrooms. They reported that they appreciated more the importance of oracy for human development, including reasoning and literacy learning. Maybe this difference is related to a curriculum, in which oracy is valued not only in the language syllabus, but also in mathematics, history, and geography syllabi. In these different documents, oracy is always taken into account when discussing learning and reasoning communication.

The Polish teachers believed that they actively supported oracy, yet they did so less than Portuguese teachers, and they were less certain that oracy is a valuable concept. These differences might stem from the fact that in the Polish curriculum, there is no explicit mention of oracy.

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