

A raid on the inarticulate

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October 2022

T.S. Eliot in *Four Quartets* testifies that success in language is a partial business, 'a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate', at best a muddled string of attempts to define and redefine the nature of one's being, to rationalise its presence in society.

George Steiner, one of the outstanding linguists of the 20th century, wrote exhaustively on the global challenges of language into which those of English are but a significant enclave. Why four thousand or more languages he asks? Why, by a factor of a thousand, more languages than human blood types?

Every people has some variant on the Tower of Babel in its mythology. There exists a proliferation of neighbouring tongues that has been one of the most intractable barriers to human collaboration and economic progress.

Arguably, in a digital and mobile phone age, we speak more to say less; we hear more and listen less.

This is the global context within which the English language is taught and learnt in our schools.

Of all language activities, writing is the most artificial and the one with which most of us struggle from time to time. No wonder then that children should find writing problematic and that they should be surrounded with assumptions and popular shibboleths about how it can be taught and improved.

Writing imposes demands on the performer which do not characterise in the same way either our other active use of language (talking) or our receptive ones (reading and listening). And just as we cannot wholly know or evidence what we are going to say on paper until we have written it, so it is with speech - our recognitions and perceptions are less articulate, less explicit before they are shared.

Language in action comprises vocabulary, phonology, grammar, tone, emphases. We can alter our meaning by being polite, aggressive or tentative and by

modifying tonal quality, timing, stress and juncture. Speech is a process of censoring, changing in mid-stream, restarting, irrelevant interruption, hesitancy and delaying monosyllabic utterances.

Speech and language are a complicated business we probably take for granted. 'It just comes naturally', the saying goes. But for millions of children in our schools, speech and language do not flow naturally at all.

From its own [extensive research](#), the national charity Speech and Language UK estimates that approaching 1.7 million children and young people have obstacles to fluency, obstacles which through their school years damage self-esteem and certainly hinder academic progress.

My own researches in chairing ASCL's commission [The Forgotten Third](#) identified fractured literacy and oracy at the heart of many students' academic and examination difficulties.

It is a sad reflection on the English schooling system that if the national inspectorate plays a certain tune, then all schools dance to that tune. Ofsted's current focus on reading is testimony to that - and that is proving no bad thing.

But before reading and writing, there is speech and language - and as a school system we need to get much better at developing all pupils' skills in this arena. This begins with families at home and is then a vibrant and vital continuum from ages 3 - 18.

An ambitious raid on the inarticulate needs to underpin every primary, special and secondary classroom, every day. Our children and young people deserve nothing less if they are to enter society as confident, conversational human beings.

For further resources, see: [The East Sussex Way](#)

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