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ABSTRACT

A number of conscious and unconscious objections (e.g., "Speech instruction should be given in the home," and "spoken English should be taught incidentally in all lessons.") have contributed to the present neglect of spoken language in secondary education. We must realize that, in order to be effective, speech must be taught systematically in a continuous, graded program throughout the secondary school. Such a program should be based on a syllabus covering every year of the pupil's school life; it should concentrate on the everyday use of speech instead of public entertainment (e.g., group discussion and impromptu talks instead of "The Annual Play"); it should provide for grading on specific tests and classwork; and it should include advanced studies. (DD)

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Spoken English

By Clive Sansom
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"We produce adults who are deprived of language as they used to be deprived of bread" — Edward Blishen

Although the average adult talks ten words for every one he writes, the spoken language is still neglected in secondary education.

Perhaps I should stop here to answer some conscious and unconscious criticisms.

1. ***"Everyone is able to talk. We don't need to teach them".***

It is a fallacy to suppose that speech is simply "doing what comes naturally". The mother-tongue is acquired by listening to other people (not only to mother!); by receiving their encouragement and correction; and by having regular opportunities for practice. Success depends on hearing intelligent, sustained conversation; on our ability to listen and to respond to what we hear; on the frequency and quality of the talks and discussions we engage in; and on the sympathetic interest of parents, teachers and other children. So, in a sense, all speaking is taught. The only question is who teaches it and whether it is taught haphazardly or systematically.

2. ***"Instruction should be given in the home".***

The same argument could be applied more forcibly to Home Arts. The average girl would have far more chance of "picking up" cookery by watching her mother in the kitchen than she has of acquiring Spoken English solely by home-instruction. Yet we have hundreds of Home Art teachers working to a carefully devised syllabus and we spend millions of dollars a year on special buildings and equipment. The point is this: if a subject is not being taught adequately in the home (and few homes provide perfect conditions, particularly in regard to "intelligent sustained conversation") the school must assume responsibility as it does for free milk, book-allowances, medical and dental inspection, instruction in cookery, and so on.

3. ***"If the pupil has received proper instruction in the primary grades, he should not require it in secondary or high school classes".***

It is true that most infant and primary schools are more concerned with Speech Education, and many of them have an excellent programme of instruction which covers oral expression, creative drama, verse speaking and speech technique. In fact some of the best speech work (I refer to the ability to express and communicate successfully through the spoken word: I am not thinking of "speaking nicely" and "using pure vowel-sounds") is to be heard in upper primary schools where the work, started in the infant classes, has been followed through. I have listened to group discussions, on topics of general interest, that would shame the majority of adults. But it cannot — at least it should not — stop there. No skill persists unless we continue to use it. We don't say, "These children have had Physical Education until the age of 11; they should now be physically fit for the rest of their lives". Again we pay millions of dollars for specialists, gymnasia and equipment. The fact is that no section of education can survive, much less progress, without continuous and graded instruction.

4. "Pupils are always inarticulate during adolescence".

This is a piece of face-saving nonsense. They are certainly going through a difficult stage of development, and they are being confined to their desks and made to concentrate on intellectual study at what is probably the least suitable period of their existence. But few of them are inarticulate in those schools where instruction in Spoken English is continued straight from the primary school and maintained throughout their post-primary education.

What so many educationists fail to realize is that the *whole* pupil is involved in speech, not only his lungs and lips. And he is not the same pupil who sat in the primary school a few years ago. His brain has developed rapidly, his emotions are disturbingly powerful, his imagination is potentially at its most creative. He is often unbalanced, because they have developed at differing rates. He may be confused, full of doubts and conflicts. Talking about his problems would help to resolve them and help to unify his personality. But expression is usually denied him — at least the kind of constructive oral expression which the classroom should be providing.

Boys and girls of that age need frequent opportunities for orderly discussion on a multitude of subjects that affect them vitally as individuals. I do not mean the type of so-called discussion which consists of questions from the teacher and reluctant one-word answers; nor the more genuine discussion which centres on some aspect of the novel during a Literature lesson. I mean serious small-group discussion on everything under the sun, from pocket money and cosmetics to conscription and space travel. If time were given to this, and the programme planned as carefully as for any other aspect of English, there would be fewer complaints about teenagers' inarticulateness. I also suspect that there would be fewer delinquents and semi-delinquents.

5. "Spoken English should be taught incidentally in all lessons".

I used to hear headmasters saying this in Britain forty years ago. It is a pious platitude which does more harm to Speech Education than direct opposition. It is on the lines of the other educational adage, "Every teacher is a teacher of English" — splendid in theory, disastrous in practice. For let's be honest. If pupils give a "correct" answer, is the Science teacher going to worry because it is poorly expressed and inaudible to half the class? Or to come nearer home, will even the English teacher worry? So long as the written language is examined and not the spoken language, we will confine ourselves to mistakes in grammar which may produce a faulty essay. What chance has *any* subject that is only taught "incidentally" against one that is given a definite syllabus, its own time allotment, and its share in the examination system? This fairy-tale of the "incidental teaching of Spoken English" simply enables us to salve our consciences. The responsibility can be shrugged off onto "everyone".

Having, I hope, cleared the ground a little, we can consider the actual work in the schools.

THE PLACE OF SPEECH

The first essential is a syllabus which covers every year of every pupil's school life. It should be quite as thorough as that for Written English or for Literature, and occupy an equal part of the time-table. If extra periods cannot be given to English as a whole — and the number of periods is usually inadequate — then the courses in Written English and Literature

will have to be cut. It is surely better that all departments of English should live on a reduced diet than that one of them should starve. In any case, I am convinced that all sections of English benefit by the stimulus of speech. Literature becomes more real; Written English becomes more fluent and individual.

After all, speech is the basis of language; writing is an extension of speech, literature is an extension and refinement of writing. Most of the muddles and defects in English-teaching have resulted from our refusal to recognize this fact.

It may be worth considering the matter historically. (I have often outlined this in lectures but it still comes as a surprise to many people.) There were three main stages in language development up to the 20th century:

(a) *The invention of speech.* This enabled man not only to express his thoughts but to think. And the power to communicate with other men made civilization possible.

(b) *The invention of writing.* This enabled man to record his speech and to give it permanence. It ensured the accumulation of knowledge.

(c) *The invention of printing,* a mere 500 years ago in the western world. This allowed knowledge to be distributed on a huge scale. It meant the beginning of universal education.

Unfortunately, printers' ink entered man's bloodstream and affected his brain-cells. He became a type-snob. From Jacobean times onward, books and writing were the be-all and end-all of education. The teaching of English became unbalanced and has remained so ever since. There never was any justification for this neglect of Spoken English, but it is now even less realistic because we have reached the fourth stage of language development:

(d) *The invention of speech machines.* The telephone, gramophone, radio, talking film, television, tape-recorder have changed the face of life. For more than half a century we have been living in the middle of a great linguistic revolution, though educationists have still not fully woken up to the fact. Man no longer depends on writing either for recording speech or for distributing it. The spoken word can reach any part of the world directly and instantaneously: it can be stored indefinitely. So although there will always be a place for the written language, especially in the higher forms of literature, it can no longer have the over-riding importance that was once attached to it. Schools and universities should realize this and change their syllabuses accordingly.

OUTLINE OF POSSIBLE COURSE

In considering a course for senior pupils, we need to wean ourselves of certain misconceptions. One is that Spoken English should conform to Written English and that oral work is confined to:

Acting a scene from a printed play.
Reading aloud from a novel.
Speaking an occasional poem.
Giving a "lecturette" that has been written out like an essay and memorized.

There is nothing necessarily wrong with these activities — except the last, which is a deadly occupation — but they ignore the fact that speech has an independent life which needs independent practice.

The other misconception is that Spoken English is an extra-curricular activity that is concerned solely with public entertainment:

The "Annual Play" which will (one hopes) reflect credit on the school and its headmaster.

A dramatic or choral-speaking entry for the local eisteddfod.

An item for a Talent Quest.

A team for a public debating contest.

Again there would be no harm in these if they were the outcome of regular activity throughout the year. But frequently they are sops — isolated and much-publicized events that camouflage the lack of any systematic work in the school itself. What is more, they tend to overlook those pupils most in need of assistance.

Consequently we need first of all to consider the everyday use of speech, free from the idea of public entertainment and free also from the written word. Some of these activities are given below. They are ones which can be tackled by any English teacher with no specialist knowledge of Speech and Drama. A few practical books are listed on page 45.

"FREE" SPEECH

Class-discussion led (but not dominated) by the teacher. This must be more than just a question-and-answer period. Success depends on first deciding the main headings for discussion, and then considering them one by one.

Group-discussion. Small groups of five or six, each with its own leader. This is probably the most valuable of all forms of oral work, because of the amount of individual practice it provides in the minimum of time.

Short prepared talks on matters of personal interest to the speaker, i.e., not "Oil-Drilling in Iraq" — unless, of course, the speaker is passionately interested in oil-drilling in Iraq — but something which involves his feelings and imagination as well as his intellect. Time is given for the collection and arrangement of information, but the talk should on no account be written out. Visual aids should be encouraged, as these remind the speaker of his sequence of ideas and take his mind off himself. After the talk, members of the class ask questions.

Impromptu talks on topics of immediate general interest, e.g., local events, last night's TV programme.

Oral instructions which play an important part in all forms of future employment. Explanations, demonstrations and running commentaries.

Story-telling, including jokes and anecdotes, making the story as interesting, exciting or amusing as possible.

Drama. Free creative work along the lines of Peter Slade, Brian Way and others. For most teachers the best approach is probably through group work, an extension of group discussion. There is also a place for *role-playing* — the acting of *real-life* situations, followed by class discussion on the characters' talk and behaviour.

Speech technique. Tricky with adolescents but necessary if communication is to be fully effective, e.g., jaw opening for audibility; lip and tongue action for clarity. Best done in small groups; tongue twisters a useful starting point.

Listening. Training in accuracy and discrimination. Friendly listening to other pupils' talk, followed by constructive comments. Criticism of radio and TV features, including advertisements.

LIAISON WORK

Reading aloud, not only from set books but from magazines and newspapers brought by individuals. It has been proved that teenagers, especially the less academic ones, can often understand and enjoy far more through the ear than through the eye. Selected pupils reading their own stories and essays.

Poetry speaking. Individual readings, preferably of poems chosen by the speaker. Also *group speaking* of suitable material. Listening to gramophone records and tapes: every school nowadays should have these as part of its library. They help us to remind pupils (and teachers) that poetry is essentially an oral art.

Acted plays and scenes. Contemporary playwrights as well as established ones. Co-operation with Music, Art and Home Arts departments on productions.

EXAMINATIONS

I am not an ardent believer in examinations, but while most aspects of a subject are examined and one is not, the latter's position is intolerable. It has no status, and teachers, parents and pupils resent any time being spent on it. Even when the foreword to an official syllabus refers to "The Vital Importance of the Spoken Word" this is in the nature of a prayer mumbled from habit and having no significance whatever. So long as examination systems last, an examination in Spoken English is absolutely essential.

Admittedly it is not an easy subject to examine. It is difficult to make categories of "right" and "wrong" — except in grammatical usage and the accepted pronunciations of certain words. There are simply degrees of effectiveness. This means adjusting our usual methods of testing.

Another problem is numbers. Hundreds of candidates can write simultaneous answers for the teacher to correct at leisure. We cannot (fortunately!) have hundreds of them *speaking at* once. They need to be heard individually or in very small groups, and heard "on the spot". Some educationists have suggested that pupils' work should be tape-recorded so that it can be marked by independent examiners. This sounds reasonable and up-to date, but I am convinced it is mistaken. Speech is more than a series of impersonal sounds. All effective speaking involves communication. It is impossible to ignore the speaker's relationship with his audience. This includes not only his voice, but face and eyes, bodily movement, his handling of visual aids, and his listeners' reactions. Besides, the modern microphone is a voice-flatterer. A boy who is audible on tape, because the microphone is an inch or two from his mouth, may be impossible to hear from halfway across the room. The only satisfactory test is one in which the speaker addresses an audience, small or large, preferably of his own age.

One argument raised against such an examination is that some pupils react badly to a speaking situation; they get fits of nerves. But many other pupils react badly to the writing situation and blanch at the sight of an exam paper. This fact has never presented us from inflicting written examinations on them. Our job is to make the conditions in the examina-

tion room as calm and friendly as we can, and to make certain that the candidates have had ample opportunity for oral practice during the year. The only way they can become effective speakers is by speaking; it can't be learned from a textbook.

All the same, there is an element of truth in the criticism. We should not rely on a single examination. Perhaps the best compromise is to give half the marks to a specific test, and half to an assessment of the pupil's work over the two previous terms. This was the method adopted in Tasmania in 1961 for the school leaving certificate. The examination consisted of:

I. *Specific Test*

(a) A short talk on a subject of personal interest to the candidate. Subjects included talks on the mouth-organ, the latest dances, assembling a Bren-gun, and a host of others, all with visual or aural aids. Sometimes the speaker used a fellow-pupil as a model.

(b) Reading a short passage of description and dialogue from one of the Literature books. The passage was unseen, but speakers and listeners were familiar with the overall story and its characters.

Several possible systems of marking were considered before the examination was introduced. It was found that detailed systems with separate columns for each aspect of speech were quite impracticable, because not one teacher in a hundred had had specialist training. Some were incapable of distinguishing between "audibility" and "intelligibility". So it was decided to give one general mark for (a) and another for (b) — the only criterion being "effectiveness of communication". In other words, "How successfully did the pupil get over his stuff?" And on this basis the level of agreement was surprising. At first some teachers were over-cautious. They were reluctant to give high marks to outstanding work or low marks to poor work. But with the help of visiting Assessors, appointed by the Schools Board, this tendency was soon corrected.

II. Assessment of Classwork

To prevent this from becoming just an inspired guess, a special form was issued on which the English teacher could jot down a mark against the pupils' name whenever they took part in any significant piece of oral work. This assumed honesty on his part and, like other sections of the human race, not all teachers were honest. They waited until the end of the term and filled up the forms like football pools. But these naughty ones were rare. On the whole the assessments were genuine and serious attempts to "place" the pupils' work.

The great drawback to the Tasmanian scheme was its restriction to "non-academic" pupils — as if those who were going to be teachers, university lecturers and lawyers had no need of training in the spoken language! One hopes that in the revised Schools Board scheme, now under consideration, every pupil, academic or otherwise, will be taught Spoken English and be examined and assessed in it.

In Britain, since the introduction of an Oral Test for the CSE, there have been a number of independent experiments in testing. The most successful seems to be that organised by the English Speaking Board. Christabel Burniston, the director of the Board, discusses it in her recent book, *Creative Oral Assessment* (Pergamon Press). And many of the inter-

esting talks which she heard during these experiments are included in her excellent practical textbook *Speech for Life* (Pergamon Press).

AN ADVANCED SPEECH COURSE

So far we have been concerned with a basic course for all pupils, but there should be room for advanced studies by those who want to go further — either because it directly affects their career (e.g., the future Speech Therapist or the teacher of Speech and Drama) or simply because they are interested in the subject. In Tasmania for the last twenty years there has been a voluntary course of this kind entitled "Art of Speech". It lasts four years, with an examination for the school-leaving certificate at the end. Each year there are between 300 and 350 candidates. The study includes voice production and phonetics, and the standard of work is often extremely high. On one occasion, for instance, all 60 candidates at one school, besides taking part in the half-hour individual examinations, helped to produce three long complete scenes from *St. Joan*, *Arms and the Man* and *Lady Precious Stream* as a group project. Each student was employed as actor, stage director or dressmaker, and the scenes were staged with almost professional competence.

Ideally, this type of advanced course is the province of the English teacher who has specialized in Speech and Drama, but it is astonishing what she can do (I am sorry to say that these good teachers are usually shes) if she believes in the value of the subject, is prepared to take advice from visiting experts, and work with enthusiasm alongside her pupils.

FEW BOOK SUGGESTIONS

The introduction of the Oral Test in Britain has resulted in a spate of books. The following are suggested as the possible start for the teacher's individual list:

Speech and Communication in the Primary School, C. Sansom (A. & C. Black Ltd., 21s E; 15s E paperback). For teachers who want to bridge the gap between Primary and post-Primary.

Speech for Life, Christabel Burniston (Pergamon Press, 15s E). An extremely practical book covering most forms of oral work in the classroom.

Speak for Yourselves, J. W. Casciani (Harrap, 10s E). Another first-rate book with a wealth of practical examples.

Group Drama, D. Adland. Three books and teachers' book. (Longmans Green.) Developing drama from group discussion.